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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MAY, 1965 Vol. 16, No. 6

A LESTER LEITH NOVELET

SOMETHING LIKE A PELICAN

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

The theft of the atomic-submarine blueprints was tied in so closely with National Security that its theft was of sobering concern to the rollickingly irrepressible Lester Leith.

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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, VOL. 16, No. 6. May, 1965. Published monthly by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. 160 W. 46th St., N. Y., N. Y. 10036. Subscriptions, 12 issues $6.00; 24 issues $12.00; single copies 50¢. Second-class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious.

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Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster—return 3579 to 160 W. 46th St., New York, New York. 10036.

A new MIKE SHAYNE adventure

STRING OF PEARLS

Shayne was sure that the thefts were tied in with murder . . . and possibly espionage. But what disturbed him the most were the "far out" aspects of the case.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

MIKE SHAYNE was not happy in the white-tie-and-tails rig. The big detective had not worn a dress suit for so long he felt like a headwaiter, and the rented outfit did not fit as well as it should have. The rental tailor had despaired of fitting Shayne's raw-boned frame, and had paled at the effect of the detective's unruly shock of red hair.

"I look like a rooster on top of a penguin," Shayne had said to Lucy Hamilton.

"I think you look wonderful, Michael," his pert secretary had protested. "It's more becoming than a dinner jacket."

Shayne had refused to be flattered by Lucy's unexpected compliment. "Angel, why do women always think their men look wonderful when they're dressed just like everyone else?"

"Because then everyone can see how much better their man looks compared to other men," Lucy said promptly.

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"Women always have to *compare,* don't they? Men, Angel, want their women to be special, one of a kind. Women want their men to be special in the long run, but to be enough like other men to start out even."

"You just don't like to be a social conformist, Michael Shayne," his brown-eyed secretary said.

"Social conformist my foot!" Shayne grunted. "I feel like a prize in a raffle."

But the dress suit was part of the job. In the suit, Shayne mingled casually with the guests at the fund-raising affair. The party for the aid of science was being given at *The Roadrunner Club,* a swank bistro on the outskirts of Miami that was actually a front for one of Ray Incavo's best gambling houses.

But gambling was not on Shayne's mind this night. He was looking for a sneak-thief. So far he had seen nothing unusual.

The night club was in a large house set back from the main highway. The gambling rooms were upstairs and, supposedly, unknown to the guests at the swank affair. As far as Major Nichols knew, the party had nothing to do with the gambling rooms.

"There's no pattern to this thing," the Major, who was Security Chief at Cape Kennedy, had pointed out, "except that the thefts seem to happen any time a group of our scientists and their wives get together at some public function."

The party was simply another of Mrs. Roger Van Rule's many fund-raising affairs. The international hostess was interested in science, her late husband had been an amateur scientist, and so she had invited many of the top Cape Kennedy staff. She had not invited Mike Shayne. Major Nichols had arranged that.

The Major was an old friend and a first-rate security man. When Nichols came to him, Shayne listened. The Major had been disturbed.

"Just a series of petty thefts, Mike, without rime or reason that I can see," Nichols explained. "Two, even three, could be coincidence. But six? That worries me."

"You think there's something more to it?" Shayne said.

"When you deal with national security, you can't overlook any peculiar series of events. It's odd, Mike, and anything odd worries me."

"What has been stolen and how?" Shayne asked.

The Major took out his small black notebook. "A watch for the son of one of our top rocket men. It was still wrapped as a gift, and stolen at the boy's birthday party. The party was at Thompson's home—he's the rocket man—and five of our other top men where there."

"How was it stolen?"

"It was removed from a pile of presents in the boy's room while the party was going on downstairs. The thief entered through the window after climbing a trellis."

"Go on," Shayne said.

The Major read from his book. "A new pair of shoes from the closet of Dr. Paxton—never worn. The thief apparently posed as a telephone repair man to get into Paxton's house. Paxton had given a small party for friends the night before."

"The same people who went to the Thompson birthday party?"

"Four of them, including Thompson," Nichols said. "Then there was a cake. Yes, Mike, a bakery cake delivered for the anniversary party of the George's. That's Professor George and his wife; he's an expert on weightless conditions. Thief never seen. The cake was missing when the cook went to serve it."

"The same people present again?"

"Yes, plus quite a few other members of our staff," Nichols said. "Next was a charm bracelet, new, bought by young Miss Auger. It was the only theft that was not tied in with some kind of party. She may even have lost the bracelet, but it seems unlikely. Auger is our Chief of Conditioning, and staff members were in and out of his house all the time.

"Finally there was Dr. Paxton's business cards and Fred Stoltzs alarm clock, a cheap one, but also new. Stoltz had just bought the clock. Paxton's cards vanished at a scientific conference in Palm Beach. He's sure his pocket was picked. Stoltz's alarm clock was taken from his room while his wife was out and he was playing poker downstairs with five other men from the staff.

"Of course, Mike, none of them are aware of the number of these petty thefts. I haven't broadcast it around. Dr. Paxton talked about his shoes and business cards because he thought it was funny. Professor George didn't even remember the cake theft until I asked him if anything had been stolen from him. He thought it was funny, too. Dr. Auger thinks his daughter lost her charm bracelet, and Fred Stoltz can't imagine what happened to his cheap alarm clock."

Shayne had tugged slowly on his

left earlobe while Nichols finished his recital of the series of peculiar thefts. Everything stolen was of no value at all—except young Thompson's watch, and a wrist watch was hardly the normal loot of a professional thief.

Shayne summed it up slowly. "So you have six items, five of no value, and one may have been simply lost. Yet the work sounds professional. The things taken are the kind of things a tramp might steal, except for the business cards and the charm bracelet. To top it off, Major, the whole series could have no connection."

"It could be just all coincidence," Nichols conceded.

"But you don't think so?" Shayne said.

"No, Mike, I don't think so. You see, I can't find anything the stolen objects have in common. But there *is* a coincidental factor involved. I checked it out carefully, and in each case six men of our staff were present when the theft occurred. All six were there on the spot, *and only those six.*"

"Six?" Shayne said.

"Yes. Again, it may mean nothing. There is no reason those six shouldn't have been present each time. They all work closely together and are friends."

"What six?" Shayne asked.

"Dr. Paxton, Dr. George, Fred Stoltz, Dr. Thompson, Dr. Auger, and Paul Balery. Their wives also, of course, except the wives were not at the Palm Beach meeting where Paxton lost his business cards, or at Fred Stoltz's poker game."

Shayne scratched his chin. "Who is this Paul Balery? He was in all the places, but nothing has been stolen from him."

"I thought about that. He's one of our chemists. He's a single man who lives on the base in the bachelor officer's quarters. He's a Frenchman originally, and has only been over here five years."

"All right," Shayne said. "So what you want me to do is hang around whenever those six get together. I'm to keep my eyes open, and if there's another theft I may be lucky enough to spot the thief."

"That's it, Mike. I can't go to the police, you understand? I have nothing really to go on, and until I do it has to be kept hush-hush."

Shayne had agreed, and now he was covering his third dress-suit affair. So far nothing had happened. But as Shayne paused in the main dining room of the plush nightclub, and thought once more about the series of odd thefts Major Nichols had described, it happened.

There was a loud, startled scream. A woman's scream. "My pearls!"

Shayne raced across the club room toward a smaller room from where the scream had come. Already others were running toward the side room. Shayne did not join them, but turned sharply a few

feet from the door. He had memorized the layout of the club, and he knew that there was a rear door to the side room which opened into a corridor that led into the kitchen and out into a parking lot.

Shayne raced out of the club and into the parking lot. Less than a hundred feet away across the lot a man was running.

II

THE RUNNING MAN heard Shayne and glanced once behind him. As he turned he passed beneath one of the parking lot floodlights, and Mike Shayne recognized him the instant the light brought his features into sharp relief. There was no mistaking the thin face topped by a shock of hair only a shade less red than Shayne's. Steve Porges, small-time jewel thief and pickpocket!

Porges recognized Shayne in the same instant. The jewel thief ran faster across the dim parking lot toward the distant fence that bordered it. Beyond the fence there was a thick grove of palm trees. And beyond the palm grove Shayne knew there was a side dirt road that led back to the highway a half a mile from *The Roadrunner Club*.

Steve Porges went over the fence in one mad scramble. By the time Shayne had climbed the fence and descended to the ground again Porges was inside the palm grove. Shayne raced on into the grove. In among the trees it was much darker. Shayne stopped to listen.

There was no sound now. Shayne drew his automatic and moved ahead cautiously. Porges rarely went armed, but Shayne was taking no chances. He wanted Porges alive, but in the dark grove the thief could be as dangerous as any cornered rat. Shayne heard the rustle of underbrush. The sound came from his left.

Shayne crouched low and faced left. The rustling sound came again as if someone was stepping very softly. Where he was crouched low to the ground, Shayne could see the lighter night sky beyond the palm grove. Against this lighter background Shayne saw a pair of legs. Even as he watched the legs moved one cautious step.

"Hold it, Porges" Shayne called. "I've got you covered."

The legs vanished and there was the sound of running. Shayne swore to himself and went after the fleeing thief. At the edge of the Palm grove he saw Porges racing down the dirt road toward the highway. The man was no fool. He had obviously guessed that Shayne did not want to shoot him, and now ran off along the road in full view. Shayne continued on in pursuit.

It looked as if it was going to be a footrace, and Shayne knew he had a good chance of catching the smaller man. He was wrong. It was not a foot race.

As Shayne raced on down the

dirt road he saw a car loom up suddenly out of the darkness. It appeared from behind a small shack to the left of the road, drove onto the dirt road, and moved slowly toward the highway as Porges reached it. Shayne raised his gun. He did not fire.

Three quick shots rang out in the night. The darts of flame came from the rear window of the moving car. Shayne hit the sloping roadbed and rolled. Bullets struck dust from the roadbed a foot from his head. He rolled again.

Stone chips and dirt flew from the spot where he had just been lying as the gun fired again from the rear window of the car.

Shayne sprawled flat in the grass at the edge of the road.

Two more shots sang over his head.

Then there was a roar as the car went into high gear and raced away down the dirt road in a cloud of dust that hung in the warm night.

Shayne raised his head to look. The car was already hidden by the cloud of dust, its red tail lights barely visible in the night. Then it reached the distant highway and was gone. Shayne had not had time to get its license number. Swearing at himself, the detective stood and stared off into the night after the vanished car.

In the gleam of the headlights it had seemed either black or dark blue, a Chrysler from the look of it, and there had been at least two men in the car—the driver and the one who had shot at him and had missed.

Shayne stood there in the night with his grey eyes narrowed. Two men and a car waiting for Porges. And the man who had shot at him had not been trying to warn him or simply slow him down. He had been shooting to kill.

He turned and walked back down the road, through the dark palm grove, and over the fonce and across the parking lot into the rear door of *The Roadrunner Club*. He paused an instant to brush the dust from his trousers and straighten his clothes. Then he went into the sideroom where the people were still gathered around a distraught older woman.

Major Nichols was in the center of the group talking to the woman. When he saw Mike Shayne he raised his eyebrows in question. Shayne shook his head in the negative. Major Nichols nodded imperceptibly, and indicated that Shayne should say nothing.

Shayne pushed through the crowd of elegantly dressed guests to the side of the Major. The distraught older woman was being comforted by a strikingly beautiful woman who seemed much younger than she was until you looked at her neck. Shayne had seen the signs of a face-lifting job before. The woman who was comforting the older woman was Mrs.

Roger Van Rule, the hostess of the plush affair.

"It's horrible, my dear," Mrs. Van Rule was saying. "I hope they were insured. Imagine, at one of *my* parties! I'll have Chief Will Gentry down here at once!"

Major Nichols ignored the chattering of the blonde hostess as he spoke to the distraught older woman. "Now, Mrs. George, you said the pearls were a five strand necklace? They must be very valuable."

Shayne scratched his chin. Nichols had emphasized the woman's name for his benefit. Mrs. George, the wife of Professor George who had lost the cake. A seventh theft from the same five people, and Shayne would have been willing to bet all he had that the sixth member of the special group, Paul Balery, was at the party.

"Not very, Major," Mrs. George said. "They were only cultured, but we are hardly rich enough to afford losing them. Besides, they are my favorites, the Professor only had them re-strung two days ago. That horrible man simply tore them from my throat!"

"Well," the Major said, "I'll leave you in Mrs. Van Rule's capable hands until the police arrive."

The Major motioned for Shayne to join him. The two men left Mrs. George being heavily comforted by Mrs. Van Rule. Nichols led Shayne across the large main room of the club and into a small private office. The Major lighted a cigarette and sat on the edge of the desk in the office.

"What happened?" Nichols said.

Shayne told him of his chase, and of recognizing Porges. He decribed the Chrysler and the attack on him. Nichols looked worried. Shayne nodded agreement with what he knew Nichols was thinking.

"Yes," Shayne said, "I think you're right, Major. There's a lot more to this than simple theft. Porges is an expert thief, but he never goes armed and I never knew him to work with anyone. He works alone—that's his MO. And he doesn't usually risk his neck on a grab of just a string of pearls, even a five-strand one."

Shayne shook his head. "Thieves are specialists nowadays, Major. Porges' specialty is the quick snatch, the dip. Usually he goes for diamonds, but he is an

expert pickpocket, too. I'd say the card-case of Paxton's, and maybe the charm bracelet could be his work, but the other jobs were the work of a good burglar. Porges never does second story work.

"I'd say there was at least one more pro, a second story man. And it looks like someone hired them because none of the stolen objects had enough value to interest thieves who were working for themselves. And the fact that there was a car waiting with men in it who were out to kill suggests that they were taking orders from someone."

"You're wholly convinced of that?" Nichols said.

"No, I could be wrong," Shayne said. "But I'd say it was most likely that they were hired."

"But why? Such men don't work cheaply," the Major said.

Shayne tugged on his ear. "There has to be some pattern. It's there, Major, but we're missing it. Something *all* the stolen objects had in common."

"Maybe we had better talk to our six," Nichols said.

"Are they all here tonight?" Shayne asked.

"All of them again, even Balery," Nichols said. "And, Shayne, someone wanted those ridiculous objects very badly. Except for the watch, and now the pearls, nothing was worth more than a few dollars. But someone was very anxious to steal them."

"Steal and keep," Shayne said. "They wanted to keep that pearl necklace enough to kill for it!"

III

THE SIX MEN looked at each other and at Mike Shayne and Major Nichols. They filled all the chairs of the small office. Shayne stood close to the door where the light was less bright. Major Nichols still sat on the edge of the desk as he talked.

"I'll get to the point," Nichols said. "Professor George, that is the second theft from you, right?"

Professor Edwin George was a tall, spare man with a pronounced stoop to his shoulders. "No, I can't think of anything else that—"

"The cake for your anniversary," Nichols said.

George laughed. "The cake? Well, it vanished, but I'd hardly put it in the same category as my wife's pearls."

"Perhaps not," Nichols said, "but when you add it to the other five thefts, it begins to assume an odd aspect."

"Five other thefts?" Paul Balery said. The chemist was a stocky man of average height, with blond hair and a quick, nervous manner. "But I have lost nothing, Major?" The chemist spoke with a strong French accent although his English was impeccable.

Nichols looked at Balery and nodded. "No, nothing has been

taken from you, but you were around all the other thefts, Mr. Balery. That's why you are here. Somehow, the thefts occur only around you six men."

Dr. Paxton, a large, bear-like man laughed loudly. "You don't mean to class my poor shoes and my card-case with Professor George's pearls, do you, Major? I probably lost the case and the shoes caught the eye of a tramp."

"How, Dr. Paxton?" Shayne said suddenly from the corner.

The bear-like man blinked. "Well, I don't know for—"

"They were new, and they were in your closet. When did some tramp see them? Or are you saying that a tramp broke into your house and stole the shoes. That's possible, but why settle for just the shoes? No one saw or heard him. Why didn't he take more from your closet if he had so much time?"

Dr. Paxton shrugged, and then looked sharply at Shayne. The big man turned to Major Nichols.

"Just who is this man, Major?" Paxton asked.

"Mike Shayne," Nichols said. "He's a private detective and a friend of mine. I asked him to help on this; he knows every thief in Miami."

"Shayne?" Fred Stoltz said. Stoltz was a small, wiry type with grey hair and a small scar on his forehead. He looked hard at Shayne. "We all know him by rep-

utation, of course." There was unmistakable deference in his voice.

But Professor George was not looking at Shayne now; he was looking at Major Nichols. The Professor was no longer smiling.

"A private detective? To watch us? Then you're serious about this, Nichols," George said.

"Very serious," Nichols said. "Seven thefts all from five people: the pearls tonight; the cake; the card-case; the new shoes; Dr. Thompson's son's watch; Stoltz's alarm clock; and Dr. Auger's daughter's charm bracelet."

A fat, cherubic little man, Dr. Auger, protested. "My daughter probably lost her bracelet, Major."

"Perhaps," Nichols said, "but when you take the seven incidents together, it's damned peculiar. Tonight Shayne recognized the man who stole the pearls. The man was a professional jewel thief, and yet both Shayne and I think that the

pearls were not worth such a man's time and risk."

The only man who had not yet spoken, Dr. Thompson, was a well-dressed man of ordinary appearance. Thompson seemed more serious about what Major Nichols had said than the others had been.

"But the stolen things seem to have nothing in common," Thompson said slowly. "What on earth could they add up to?"

"That is what we don't know," Nichols said, "and I'll admit that we can't see any pattern in what was stolen either. We are not even sure they all are thefts, as Dr. Auger pointed out. But there is something very strange about it all."

Shayne had been watching the six men closely. They were clearly puzzled, but did not appear to be under a strain. They smiled at each other from time to time. They were definitely friendly. There seemed to be a certain deference toward Professor George—as pronounced as the deference which Stoltz had displayed at the mention of Shayne's name—and it was not just that it was George's wife who had lost her pearls. Now Shayne suddenly spoke again.

"What do you six do?" Shayne snapped. "I mean, what is your connection?"

Professor George said, "Why, we're all good friends, Mr. Shayne. You might say we were a team."

"Team?" Shayne said.

"Yes, we work on Project Fifty-seven together. We have been on it for a year or so."

"What is Project Fifty-seven?" Shayne asked.

Major Nichols broke in. "A highly secret project, Mike. I don't even know exactly myself, except that it's top secret. It involves satellites, doesn't it, Professor George."

"Yes, satellites, and that is all I can say."

"Does it have military potential?" Shayne said.

"Well, you might say it could have," George said, "but, Mr. Shayne, we don't work on that team exclusively. It's in its very early stages. We all do other work."

"But you six work on Project Fifty-seven," Shayne said. "Who else works on it?"

Professor George seemed uncomfortable. "No one else. Only we six at the present. As I said, it is in its early stages."

Shayne looked grim. "There's your connection, Major, your pattern. All six men are Project Fifty-seven, and only these six."

Major Nichols was frowning heavily now and there was a look of concern in his eyes. "When was the last time you all worked on Project Fifty-seven?" he asked.

"Why, yesterday, Major," Professor George said.

Fred Stoltz laughed. The small, wiry man with the grey hair began to tick off his fingers as he spoke.

"A cake, a string of pearls, a

card-case, a pair of shoes, a charm bracelet, an alarm clock, and a gift watch," he enumerated. "What the devil could any of those things have to do with Project Fifty-seven? It's ridiculous!"

"I don't know, Mr. Stoltz," Nichols said. "But I don't like it one damned bit. You can all leave now, but I suggest you not mention this meeting to anyone, not even to your wives, or, in Balery's case, girlfriends."

"My lips are sealed, Major," Paul Balery said with a smile.

When the six men had gone, Shayne lighted a cigarette. Nichols still sat on the edge of the desk. The Major also smoked, blowing clouds of smoke into the quiet air of the small private office.

"What could it be?" the Major said. "Information? Details on Project Fifty-seven?"

"Microfilm, maybe?" Shayne said.

"In a string of pearls?" Nichols said.

"Or in a cake for that matter. How do you get the film into the cake without breaking the cake unless you baked it yourself?"

"Besides," Nichols said. "Why put information in objects to be stolen when all you'd have to do is hand it over to an accomplice once you had it off the base?"

"It's those pearls that bother me," Shayne said. "I think I better talk to Steve Porges."

"Can you find him, Mike?"

"I'll find him," Shayne said.

He strode from the private office and out of *The Roadrunner Club* to his car. The first thing he did was to take off his white tie, loosen his high wing collar, and sigh with relief. The next thing he did was to drive to his office on Flagler Street and make a telephone call. The voice on the other end was low and cautious.

"I want Steve Porges," Shayne said.

"He's hot," the voice said. "Hot, very hot."

"One hundred, just the address," Shayne said.

"I'll see," the voice said and was gone.

Shayne hung up. There was nothing to do now but wait. The redhead clapped his panama back on his head and went home to get some sleep.

He dreamed all night of Project Fifty-seven and a string of pearls.

IV

IT WAS NOON the next day before the call came through on Mike Shayne's private line. Lucy Hamilton stood by on the extension, her notebook poised. The same low, cautious voice spoke.

"Four twenty-two Monroe, apartment two, the back," the voice said. "Make the drop airline baggage room—Mr. Waxman."

And the voice was gone. Shayne grinned as he hung up. Little Pete

was his best stool pigeon. When Pete couldn't get it, no one could. Shayne looked at Lucy.

"You got it all?"

"Yes, Michael," Lucy said, and wrinkled her pert nose. "Ugh, I hate that little animal."

"He's useful, Angel," Shayne said. "You take the money and make the drop as he instructed."

"All right, Michael," Lucy agreed.

Shayne walked swiftly from his office and down the elevator into the lobby. On Flagler Street he strode in the sun to his car and drove off through the midday Miami traffic.

Four Twenty-Two Monroe Street turned out to be a shabby frame house in one of the worst slum areas of the city. Shayne parked out of sight up the block and walked in the shadow of the buildings out of sight from the rear windows. He slipped into the ramshackle house and went up the stairs silently.

Apartment 2B was at the far end of the long second floor hallway. Shayne crept stealthily to the door and listened. A radio was playing softly inside the room. Shayne tried the door. It was locked from the inside. Shayne backed off quickly, and ran at the door with his massive shoulder. It splintered and crashed open.

Steve Porges lay on the floor, his head and the entire upper half of his body covered with blood. He had been shot twice in the back of the skull and his face was not pretty to look at. On a side table the radio played the latest popular music, a hit tune from a Broadway musical.

Shayne bent over the body of Steve Porges. It was still warm, but was growing cold and stiff. He estimated that Porges had been dead less than an hour. Or, in other words, the slain jewel thief had been killed even before Little Pete had given Shayne his address —but not much before.

There could be little doubt as to why Porges had been shot. The thief had recognized Mike Shayne last night—and Shayne had known Porges. The killers had probably heard Shayne call the little thief by name, and that been his death warrant.

Shayne stood and looked around the room. He blinked. All over the floor, shining in the sunlight which was streaming in through the opened window that led to the fire escape, were the pearls. Matched pearls lying everywhere—on the rug, in the corners, in the cracks of the bare area of the floor. Shayne bent and began to pick them up.

He found a paper bag and soon had it a quarter filled. Just about the right amount of pearls for a five-strand necklace, he estimated. Then he looked again around the room. Something was odd. He was thinking about what it could be

when his grey eyes saw another object.

On the dresser of the shabby room was an empty leather card case. A small case just the right size for carrying business cards. Shayne picked it up to study it. On the front were the initials, *J. L. P.* Shayne was fairly sure the *P* stood for Paxton, and that he held Dr. Paxton's missing card-case. An empty card-case, all the business cards gone.

He found nothing else, and had turned to consider what it was that was peculiar in the room when he happened to glance down toward the wastebasket. From the mass of paper in the basket a word seemed to leap up at him—*Auger*. Shayne bent own and picked out the scrap of paper with the word on it.

The paper was not a scrap but a crumpled sheet of notebook paper. Shayne carried it to the desk in the shabby room and smoothed it out flat. Then he read it. On the paper, in a small and neat handwriting, were five names and addresses. The names and addresses of Paxton, Stoltz, George, Thompson and Auger. Only the five.

Shayne tugged on his earlobe as he studied the five names and addresses, and looked down toward the dead body of Porges. Porges himself had probably written the names into a neat list to have them ready when the call came to steal something from one of them. As

Shayne studied the names something seemed to shout in his ears. Something so simple he had never noticed it until he looked at all five names and addresses together.

All five men lived off the Cape Kennedy base.

Paul Balery did not live off the base. Balery lived on the base, at the bachelor officers quarters, and Paul Balery's name was not on the list.

Shayne took the list, the empty card-case, and the bag of pearls, and ran out of the room and down the stairs to the street. He got back into his car, put the card-case, list and pearls into the glove compartment, and drove to the first tavern he could find.

In the tavern he strode to the telephone. He called the police first to report the body of Steve Porges. Then he called Major Nichols. The Major did not wait for him to speak.

"Mike? Damn it, man, I've been trying to get you for the last half hour. Professor Edwin George has been shot! Yes, he's dead! Right in his own house. He had tried to call me but I was out of my office. When I got back I called him but no answer. I went over there, and he was dead!"

"Any idea who did it?"

"None, damn it. Not one of the other five has a decent alibi! They were all out driving, or working alone, or taking a walk, or something like that."

"Okay, Major, I'll be right over. I think I've got an idea what the thefts are all about anyway. Do me a favor, check to see how many of the stolen items had been on the base just before they were stolen."

"All right, Mike, but hurry. It's murder now. I'll have to call in the police."

Shayne hung up and walked out of the telephone booth. His mind was on the murder of Professor George. Why? Because Edwin George had guessed something, or remembered something? He was thinking so hard he did not notice the two men stand up from the bar of the tavern and follow him toward the door.

At the door he walked out in the sun and turned left toward his car. He saw the dark blue Chrysler and the man standing directly in his path. Shayne recognized the car instantly. The big detective made a sharp turn to go back toward the tavern. But the other two men were directly behind him.

One of them stepped up, struck him once expertly across the temple, and he slumped into the arms of the other two. They had him across the sidewalk and into the Chrysler before he even passed out.

There was no one on the street to see the quick, efficient operation. In the car everything went black for Mike Shayne.

V

THERE WAS THE sound of water. Faint, Mike Shayne heard water lapping against some solid object. Probably a piling, and the water was the water of Biscayne Bay. That would be logical. He thought that would be very logical. He nodded.

Pain exploded in his head. He passed out again.

When Shayne came awake the second time the water seemed closer and it was definitely moving. Below him. He looked around and saw that he was in a small room in some sort of shack. The water was higher beneath, and he knew he was in a shack set on piles out over Biscayne Bay. The tide was coming in, which explained why the water was higher this time.

Where he lay on the floor he could see light ahead of him beneath a closed door. From time to time shadows passed across the faint line of light, and he heard

voices speaking low out in the other room of the shack. He strained to hear, but was unable to catch more than a sentence or two.

His hands were bound behind him with rope and his head still hurt from where he had been struck. His feet were tied. He had not been gagged, but he knew that only meant that where he was there would be no one to hear him call for help. He tested the ropes. They were secure, but there was a small give to them. He began to search the bare and empty room for something that he could use as a cutting tool.

The walls were badly made, but they were only bare wood. There was not a stick of furniture anywhere in the room. He saw no plates or water glass. The men who had abducted him would not be stupid enough to leave a glass if they brought one.

He turned his attention to the floor. The boards were old and rotten, but there were no sharp edges that he could see. Then he saw the nail heads in the boards directly beneath him. The heads were all flush with the floor—but the floor boards were rotten. If he could work a nail loose!

It was slow painful work lying on his back, his hands moving the rotten old boards back and forth, up and down. Working on the loosened board to free a single rusted nail. And then he would have to work too slowly, very slowly, if he hoped to cut through the thick ropes with no more than the rusted point of a single large nail.

Shayne had little doubt as to what would happen to him if he did not make the attempt. He worked. Suddenly, the voices beyond the door of his small prison rose louder.

"What about our friend in the next room?" One of the voices asked.

"The misguided private detective?" a foreign voice replied. "Soon we will find out just what he knows, and then we will cease to have use for him, *bien*?"

"Shayne has a lot of friends, Brodnic," the first voice said. "Gentry, the Chief of Police. That security chief Major Nichols.—"

"Good," the man called Brodnic said. "Then he had better tell us what they have found out. So far we know that this Major Nichols feels that there is something peculiar, and that Shayne recognized Steve Porges."

Shayne worked his roped hands back and forth across the point of the nail. His wrist was cut now and bloody. The nail fell from his fingers many times, and was painfully picked up again. He worked, but he also heard. And his mind told him that the voices outside his prison knew about the meeting last night in the private office of *The Roadrunner Club*. Which meant only one thing—someone in that

room was working with the men who had captured him.

Outside in the other room of the shack above the water, a new voice spoke. This voice was deep, strong, and thick with the accent of some foreign country. A commanding voice.

"We must change our method," the new voice said. "The Major has become suspicious, the method is no longer useful. If they become too alarmed, work on the project will be stopped pending solution of the situation. That must not happen."

"Then we must contact our man," the voice named Brodnic said. "Is that not so, Colonel Zabel?"

"No, Brodnic, it is not so. We must have no contact with him for some time. He will understand, there will be no need for instructions until a new method of transmission is developed. With that detective observing, it is most fortunate that we did not make effort to contact him after this last transmission."

"And the detective?"

"He will die. I leave that to you, Brodnic," the deep voice of Colonel Zabel said.

And Shayne felt the first strand of rope part behind his back. His wrists strained, worked, loosened the remaining strands. He heard, outside in the other room of the shack with the water lapping at the pilings beneath the floor, the sound of heavy feet walking. A door, a door on rusted hinges, opened and then closed. A car started, reversed, went into low and moved away from the shack.

His hands came free.

Shayne sat up, bent over his hands to look at the cut and scraped wrists that bled in the darkness of the small shack room. Then he reached to free his feet.

In the other room the voices spoke again.

"We better find out just what this detective knows," the voice of Brodnic said.

"You think he has come to yet?" the American voice said. There was something familiar about the man's slow, precise speech.

"If not we will see to it that he revives quickly, yes?"

"You're the boss," the familiar voice said.

There was the sound of feet walking toward the door of Mike Shayne's prison. His feet were free. Quickly he wrapped the loosened ropes around his ankles again, put his hands behind his back, and lay flat. He began to groan in the dark room. The door opened, and light cut across his eyes like a razor edge. He groaned louder and closed his eyes against the cut of the light.

They were standing over him, he could feel them.

"Ah, you are awake my friend," the voice of Brodnic said.

Shayne opened his eyes, blinked. Gradually his vision steadied and he could see them looming

above him. Brodnic was a tall, slender man carrying a Luger lightly in his left hand as if the big pistol were no heavier than a .38. In his left hand! So Brodnic was left-handed. Shayne looked at the other man, the American.

"Hello, peeper," the American said.

Shayne stared up at the big, heavy face. It seemed much too big for the average-sized body beneath it. Walter Masters was balanced cat-like on the balls of his feet. He was one of the best cat burglars in Miami, and his mug was in every police file in a five state area.

"Spying's off your beat, isn't it Walter?" Shayne said thickly, shaking his big head as if to clear it.

"You makes a buck where you can, peeper," Masters said. "My talents were needed."

"For stealing shoes?" Shayne said.

"That's a gasser, ain't it?" Masters grinned.

Brodnic leveled his Luger. "What do you know about those shoes, my friend?"

"Some sort of information transmission," Shayne said. "You boys talk too loud out there."

"You heard?" Brodnic said warily.

Shayne was playing for time, knowing that if he could keep them busy thinking about what he knew they'd be less likely to watch him closely. They would have to relax for just an instant. Brodnic seemed worried that Shayne had overheard the conversation in the other room. Masters, too, looked upset.

Shayne gathered his muscles for his attack while they were momentarily relaxed.

Brodic suddenly stiffened, and leveled his Luger straight at Shayne.

"Masters! Check the ropes, quick? He was awake all the time. That groaning we heard was a fake!"

Masters moved close to Shayne and bent down over his feet to check the ropes. There was no time to wait now. Brodnic was standing directly over Shayne to the left of Masters as the tall man bent down. Shayne's feet lashed

out, caught the cat burglar's feet in a judo throw, and Masters went over.

Manipulating his feet as precisely as he could, Shayne knocked Masters to the left. The cat burglar flailed the air to regain his balance, and failed. With a cry he fell heavily against Brodnic and went down. The Luger flew across the room. Brodnic staggered but managed to remain on his feet.

Shayne was up and on Brodnic. The foreigner recovered his balance and swung at Shayne. The detective stepped inside the punching left hand, slipped the blow harmlessly around his neck, and dropped Brodnic with one blow to the jaw. The tall man went down as if axed.

Masters, on the floor, was scrambling for the Luger. Like the dead Steve Porges, Walter Masters did not carry a gun in his work. But the cat burglar was within a foot of the Luger. Shayne did not wait. He might have reached Masters in time to stop the burglar from getting the big gun but the odds were against it. He whirled instead and dived out of the room through the opened door.

A shot from the Luger smashed into the door behind him.

In the larger room he saw the door on the far side. Behind him Masters was on his feet and running for the door of the smaller room. Shayne saw the closed window of the shack to his left only a few feet away. With death so close no risk seemed too great. He hunched, covered his face with his arms, and dived through the window in a shattering of glass and wood.

Another shot from the Luger sang harmlessly through the jagged edges of the broken window.

Shayne went down and down. He braced to hit the ground, twisting to take the shock on his massive shoulders. There was no need. He struck water, went down, and his shoulder sank into the softness of mud beneath the surface.

As soon as the water closed over his head he rolled over onto his face, jack-knifed around, and began to swim beneath the shallow water. The night was dark. Shayne hoped it was dark enough so that Masters could not see him beneath the shallow surface. His lungs bursting he came up. His head struck a piling. He grinned with relief. He was, as he had hoped, beneath the shack itself, hidden there among the dark pilings at the edge of the bay. Above his head wet boards glimmered dully.

He checked his body for cuts. He was bleeding, but very little. The dive through the window had cut the knuckles of his left hand, and ripped his trousers on his left leg from knee to ankle, leaving a long cut that bled but was only skin deep. He was all right, but they would be looking soon under the

shack. He floated silently in the water and listened.

Above him he heard running feet. That would be Masters. Then he heard the second pair of feet as Brodnic walked shakily out of the small room. There ensued a silence. Then both pairs of feet walked to the door of the shack and out. Shayne saw them as they appeared on the shore. Brodnic stood there in the dark and looked to the left and right. Masters pointed to the left, in the direction Shayne had dived.

Brodnic shook his head. The left-handed foreigner was again holding his Luger. Brodnic was looking straight toward Shayne where the redhead was hidden beneath the shack. Brodnic was not a fool. The tall man suddenly motioned to Masters, and the cat burglar turned and ran toward a parked car—the blue Chrysler.

Shayne knew what was happening. There would be a radio or radiophone in the car. He wondered how far the other members of the gang would have to come when Masters called them.

Then he saw Brodnic moving cautiously toward him. The man with the Luger waded into the water beneath the shack, a grim smile on his face. Shayne tensed to meet Brodnic. The detective glanced around for the best escape. He saw the small green light moving close by out on the Bay. A boat. Shayne sank and turned and

swam underwater in the direction of the light.

When he surfaced it was still fifty yards off and moving away to his right. He shouted. The boat did not slow down. Behind him Mike Shayne heard Brodnic swear. The Luger fired twice, the bullets kicking water into the air near Shayne. On the boat men ran to the side facing Shayne. The shots had attracted them.

They saw Shayne swimming toward them. There were no more shots from the Luger. As Shayne was pulled from the water by the men on the small boat, he looked back and saw the blue Chrysler driving rapidly away from the shack.

VI

IT WAS LATER the next afternoon when Mike Shayne drove into Cape Kennedy and parked in front of the building that housed

the office of Major Nichols. Back in Miami the police were looking for the blue Chrysler, and there was an all-points out on the man named Brodnic. But Will Gentry was not optimistic about capturing the left-handed foreigner. The Miami Chief of Police guessed that Brodnic was already out of the country or dead.

"These are pros we're dealing with," Gentry had said. "I'll alert the FBI and CIA."

Gentry was so sure because of what they had found when Shayne had led the police back to the shack at the edge of the Bay. There had been no need to put out a bulletin on Walter Masters, cat burglar. Masters body had been found lying dead, shot twice, on the shore of the Bay beside the shack.

"They don't take chances," Shayne told Major Nichols now in the Major's office. "Masters knew me, and I knew him, and that was his death warrant, just as it was for Steve Porges. These boys want no one to be able to trace them in any way."

Major Nichols frowned. "You're sure they're a spy ring getting information from here somehow?"

Shayne nodded. "I'm sure. The leader seems to be a Colonel Zabel, and they have a man here on the base. One of our five surviving suspects, Major. It has to be because Zabel knew all about our little meeting last night."

"But, damn it, Mike, how can they have gotten secret data out by those thefts?" Nichols said. "I can see it with the watch, and the card-case, but—"

"Let's take it in order, Major," Shayne said. "First, all of our six men lived off the base except Balery. Balery never figured in the thefts. The obvious conclusion is that our spy whoever he is, wanted the thefts done off the base. Now, I asked you to check carefully on how many of those stolen items had been *on the base* before they were stolen."

Major Nichols nodded. "All of them, Mike, except the cake of Professor George. You see, it works out that Thompson bought his son's watch on his lunch time and brought it back to the office with him. But it was checked by my men at the gate both ways—the package contained nothing but the watch gift-wrapped.

"The pearls had just been restrung by a jeweler in town, and Professor George had also carried them onto the base and off. But my gate guards checked them, too. They weren't even wrapped—just five strands of pearls in a bag.

"Stoltz bought his alarm clock at the base store and took it out in a paper bag. Paxton always had his card-case, so it was on and off the base many times. Paxton also had bought his shoes on his lunch time and brought them on and off the base. Auger didn't think his

kid's charm bracelet had been on the base at first. But then he remembered he brought it to the office one day just before it vanished to fix the clasp with tools he had here."

Shayne nodded. "That's what I thought. Those things weren't important; they were probably just left lying around. Our spy had easy access to them. That was his way of getting his data off the base without risk to himself. Then he had the gang outside steal the items and there was no connection to him. If it wasn't for your suspicious nose for the unusual, Major, no one would have thought twice about the thefts. It was a thousand-to-one no one would ever suspect. You just happen to be a better cop than most security chiefs."

"Thanks for the compliment, Mike," Nichols growled, "but how the devil did those items contain information? And what about the cake? That was never on the base."

"A step at a time, Major," Shayne said, tugging slowly on his earlobe. "First, the cards were all missing from that card-case when I found it. So information had been put on the cards either in invisible ink or maybe in microfilm slipped inside the cards by carefully slitting them."

Major Nichols stood up and began to pace his office. "And the charm bracelet too. I asked about that, and Auger told me it was one of those bracelets with small, flat plates. My guards are good, but I doubt if even I would have thought of slitting open cards or breaking open flat charms on a bracelet. Not without more suspicion to go on."

Shayne leaned forward in his chair. "Good. Now that leaves the watch, the alarm clock, the shoes, the cake, and the pearls. Microfilm in the alarm clock and watch?"

"Very risky" Nichols said. "They are containers, and we might easily have opened them. In fact my guards did open the back of the alarm clock. Nothing inside but the works, and the shoes, too, Mike. Shoes are an obvious place. My men looked inside the shoes."

"And anyway," Shayne said, "it still leaves us with the two hardest —the pearls and the cake. The cake. The cake was never on the base, so just what could have been inside the cake?"

"I suppose it could have been put in at George's house," Nichols said, "but that would have defeated the whole purpose of the scheme. I mean, our spy would have to have taken the information off the base first, and the whole idea was to get the data off the base unsuspected."

Shayne nodded slowly. Nichols was right. And yet the cake had been in the house of Professor George, and now George had been killed. Shayne rubbed the thick red stubble on his chin.

"Let's try another angle," Shayne

said. "What kind of data could it all have been?"

"I asked them about that. There were drawings and such, but most of it was just written reports at the early stage Project Fifty-seven was in. Some formulas but mostly straight reporting of results of tests."

"What about Professor George," Shayne said, "why was he killed? That's the key now."

"I don't know. As I told you, he called me but I was out. When I got over to his house he was dead. I think he had been doing just what we're doing. There was a scrawled list of the stolen items on his desk. He had been shot at the desk."

"A list?" Shayne said. "Was the cake on it?"

"Yes, it was down last. Funny, too, because he had underlined it and written 'boxed and tied' beside it."

Shayne blinked. Suddenly he sat bolt upright in his chair. He looked at Nichols, his grey eyes blinking rapidly. He was seeing the death room of Steve Porges. Something had been odd, strange—no, not odd, but something missing! The odd thing in that room was that something that should have been there was not there. Mike Shayne leaned forward in his chair with a glint in his grey eyes.

"*Boxed and tied*! That's it, Major. George must have noticed something or someone around that cake. The cake was still boxed and tied when it was stolen. The Thompson watch was still in its box and gift-wrapped! The shoes have laces. And the alarm clock has a large main spring!"

"But I—" Nichols began.

Shayne broke in. "Major, I think we can trap our spy. They won't try this method again, but maybe we can trap him anyway. They said that they had not contacted their inside spy since the theft of the pearls, and they won't contact him. Major, did you tell our five men about Porges being killed, and how I found him?"

"Yes, I did. I also mentioned that you had found the pearls. I wanted to see their reaction, but there wasn't anything that I could see."

"There will be," Shayne said grimly. "Major, I want you to restring the pearls exactly the way they should be, clasp and all, so that they will recongnize them. Then show the pearls to all five, and tell them we know the secret of why they were stolen. Tell them we're just waiting for the proper equipment to be assembled, and then we'll know which one of them is guilty. Tell them we'll run the tests tonight, and then lock the pearls in your desk."

"All right, Mike," Nichols said. "But, Mike, do we know the secret of why they were stolen?"

"I think so," Shayne said grimly. "You see, Major, when I found the pearls I sensed that there was

something missing, something that should have been in the room with the pearls."

"What, Mike?"

"The string, Major, the string! There were pearls all over the floor, all the pearls that should have been there, but there was no string to hold them!"

VII

IN THE LAB of the base security division at Cape Kennedy, Major Nichols and two of his men worked over a small, complicated piece of equipment in full view on a lab bench. Nichols and his men worked in silence, speaking only to ask for parts, intent on their work.

The man at the window watched them for some time. He was crouched low in the bushes outside the window, his face hidden in darkness. In his hand he held a small revolver fitted with a silencer. He watched Major Nichols and his men intently, and then he turned and crawled slowly away.

Once away from the window he stood up and walked rapidly along behind the building until he came to another window. This window was dark. He counted windows, and nodded to himself. Then he crept up the darkened window, took some equipment from a small black bag he carried in the hand that was not holding the pistol.

He stood up and raised a small, red-rubber plumber's suction

plunger. He placed the plunger against the window just below the lock. He pressed it hard and it stuck to the glass, its handle standing straight out in the night.

Quickly he bent again and brought up a glass cutting tool. He cut the glass around the plunger head, keeping a firm grasp on the plunger handle. Then he tapped the glass, pulled on the plunger, and a neat circle of glass came off stuck to the plunger.

The man replaced his tools in the black bag, left the bag on the ground outside the window, and took up his silenced pistol. With his free hand he reached in and unlocked the window. He raised it

silently, his eyes narrowing as he peered into the darkened room. Then he quickly climbed into the room and walked in the dark straight to the desk that stood in the far side of the room. He took a tool from his pocket and broke the lock of the desk.

He opened all the drawers. Then he reached into the third drawer on the left and brought out a five-strand string of pearls. He held the pearls in his hand as he turned to walk back to the window.

The lights burst on in Major Nichols' office, flooding the room with radiance.

"That's far enough! Drop the gun!"

The man froze. The voice had come from behind him. The man seemed to tense for an instant as if to make one violent spring for the open window.

"Don't try it," Shayne warned from behind him.

The man appeared to slump where he stood.

"That's better," Shayne said. "Now turn around."

The man by the desk began to turn, suddenly whirled and raised his silenced pistol. Shayne shot the gun from his hand. The man swore and Shayne smiled. Already the sound of the shot had brought running feet out in the corridor.

The door burst open and Major Nichols stood there with his pistol drawn and ready. Nichols stared at the cursing man who was holding his bloody hand.

"Meet Fred Stoltz, master spy, Major," Shayne said. And Shayne looked at the angry face of Fred Stoltz, scientist and spy. "How much did they pay you, Stoltz, or are you one of their boys and did it for duty?"

"You will never know, any of you," Stoltz said.

"I think we will. You look like a money-spy to me. You'll talk."

And Fred Stoltz did talk. The next day the captured spy gave full details on the activities of Colonel Zabel's spy ring. The FBI and CIA went to work. In Shayne's Flagler Street office, Major Nichols was not optimistic.

"I think Chief Gentry is right, Mike," Nichols said. "When you got away they ran for cover."

"The important thing about a spy ring is to break it up," Shayne said. "You don't have to catch them to stop them. You just have to know them, and Stoltz told us all about them. They won't be of much use in the future. And we've got Stoltz."

Major Nichols nodded, and looked out the window of Shayne's office at the bright Miami sun.

"He killed Edwin George," Nichols said. "George had seen him in the kitchen with that cake box. He thought nothing of it at the time, but then when we had that meeting at the nightclub George got to thinking, I suppose. He real-

ized that he had seen Stoltz with the cake, and that Stoltz had changed the string on the box."

Shayne laughed. "They always use too much string on a cake box, three or four feet."

"I still don't see how you guessed," Nichols said.

"About the recordings?" Shayne said. "Well, it was a combination of things. You described the straight data of Project Fifty-Seven, remember? You said it was mostly straight reports and some formulas. Material that did not need photographing. Verbal data!

"There was some microfilm, of course, in the cards and the charm bracelet as we thought. But most of it was very slow speed recordings designed to be played back in a slow speed player. It was a pretty smart idea to record on the mainspring of the clock, the laces of the shoes, the string around the watch and cake box, and the string of the pearls.

"Of course, Major, he had to record in his own voice, so when we made him think we had recovered the pearls, string and all, he knew he had to steal the pearls again or we'd have him cold. So he tried. He couldn't let us play that string through a playback machine, could he?"

Major Nichols was standing at the window now looking out over the city of Miami bright in the sun.

"All for money," the Major said. "And he killed Professor George because he knew George had seen him putting the substitute string around that cake box. It was a good plan, Mike. Even when I got suspicious about thefts, I doubt if I'd have really guessed. You caught him."

Shayne shook his head. "No, Major you did. You hired me to watch. That was what ended them. They did not suspect that you had hired a stranger as a stake-out, and I recognized Porges. If I hadn't recognized him, they'd still be operating."

Major Nichols turned from the window and smiled at Shayne.

"Or if they had thought to take the pearls along with the string," Nichols said.

"I guess the string broke when Porges put up a fight in that room. It just never occurred to them to pick up the pearls."

"Very careless," Nichols said.

"If they weren't careless sometimes, Major, we'd never catch them, would we?"

"No, I suppose not."

"And speaking of careless," Shayne said, "you owe me the price of a dress suit. I got careless with it when I chased Porges and landed in that ditch."

The Major laughed as he counted out the money for the dress suit and laid it on Shayne's desk.

Featuring

SHELL SCOTT

THE SLEEPER CAPER

If you're a jaded tourist there's an unusual kind of thrill about playing the horses in Mexico City. But not if you happen to be a target for killers.

by RICHARD S. PRATHER

YOU TAKE A plane from the States and head south; a few hours later and up more than seven thousand feet, where the air is thin and clear, you land at Mexico City and take a cab to the Hipodromo de las Americas where the horses run sideways, backwards, and occasionally around the seven-furlong track, and you go out to the paddock area after the fourth race.

You see a big, young, husky, unhandsome character with a Mexico City tan, short, prematurely white hair sticking up in the air like the end of clipped whiskbroom, and his arms around the waists of two lovely young gals who look like Latin screen stars, and you say, "Geez, look at the slob with the two tomatoes."

That's me. I am the slob with the two tomatoes, and the hell with you.

Five days ago I'd left Los

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Angeles and my one-man agency, SHELDON SCOTT, *Investigations,* and flown to Mexico for my client, Cookie Martini, an L. A. bookmaker. A big one. You may sneer at the thought of my taking a bookie for a client. Okay, sneer. As far as I'm concerned, people are going to gamble whether there are bookies or not. If they can't bet on the nags, they'll bet on the number of warts on some guy's nose.

Cookie Martini was at least an honest bookie, and his money was clean. In the last year or so he'd started booking bets on tracks outside the State—France, South America, and Mexico City. He and some other books taking Mexico City bets had recently been clipped for nearly three hundred thousand dollars. Cookie figured that too many longshots were coming in, too many sleepers, and he suspected a fix. So he'd hired me to find out if anything smelled here at the Hipodromo de las Americas.

It smelled. And it was starting to look as if a guy could get killed just sniffing.

"I wonder where Pete is?" Vera asked.

Vera was the tomato on my left, and I had to reach way down to put my arm around her. She was only five feet tall, but that still made he a head taller than Pete. Pedro Ramirez, her husband, was one of the season's leading riders at the Hipodromo, even though he was still an apprentice.

"He'll be here in a minute, Vera," I said.

He was a few minutes late, and we were to meet him here and wish him luck. Pete was riding *Jetboy,* the solid favorite in the fifth race coming up, and it was a big race for him. He'd started the day with a total of thirty-eight wins behind him and won the second race. One more winner and he'd lose his "bug," his apprentice's two-kilo weight allowance, and become a full-fledged jockey. It was important in another way, too. He was supposed to throw the race.

Elena Angel squeezed my right arm. "Here he comes, Shell."

For a moment, I just enjoyed the squeeze. This Elena was married to nobody and that pleased me hugely. She was tall, black-haired, with creamy skin and what I thought of simply as 'Mexican' eyes. Dark eyes, soft, big shadowed eyes with both the question and the answer in them. And her body could best be described with words that are pornographic.

I gave Elena a squeeze to make us even—actually, that particular squeeze put me way ahead—and looked to my left. I could see Pete walking toward us fast from the Jockey's Room practically sprinting.

I always got a kick out of him when he was in a hurry—unless he was on a horse. He was only

about four feet tall, wiry, a man of twenty-four, but he still looked like a kid. A tough kid. A kid who'd haul off and slug you in the knee if you made the wrong crack.

When he got close, I said, "Hi, champ. I'm sinking the roll this trip."

He grinned, his jaws working while he flashed white teeth. Pete was nervous, high-strung, like a thoroughbred, and he constantly chewed little candy-coated Chiclets.

"*Si*," he said. "You sink it all, Shell. This one is a shooin. This one, I lose the bug for sure."

He spit out his gum and fished in his pocket for the pack, shook two white Chiclets out into his small palm. "*Dio*, they go fast," he said in surprise. "I thought I had a full box." He shrugged. "Gum?" He tossed one cube into his mouth and held out his hand.

The girls didn't chew. I took the gum, started to pop it into my mouth, and stopped when I saw Pete's face. I'd just noticed that his lips were puffed and the side of his jaw was swollen.

"What happened, Pete?" I asked. "You kiss a horse?"

He stopped grinning. "I kiss a fist. Jimmy Rath's." He saw the hot anger boil up in me at mention of the name, and he added, "I fix him. Don't worry. Sometime I fix him with a baseball bat. Anyway, I fix him good when I boot *Jetboy* in."

I looked toward the oval walking ring. Jimmy Rath was there with another guy about my size. I took a step toward them but Elena and Vera both hung onto my arms and Pete said, "Relax, Shell. So what do we prove this way? When I boot

this one home, I'm through for the day. I come up to your table, and you can stand right behind me when I spit in his eyes. I don't need no bodyguard. Anyway, Rath's just Hammond's stooge. Hammond, he's back of it."

I knew what Pete meant. We both knew it, and everybody knew it, but proving it was another thing. When Cookie Martini sent me down here he'd given me a letter to Pete, and Cookie told me he'd checked and there wasn't a more honest jock in the business than Pete Ramirez. I'd watched Pete race Sunday, and met him afterwards. I told him what I was here for, laid it on the line.

Pete was, if anything, more interested in cleaning up any mess

here than I was. Like a lot of Mexican kids born in the poor outlying states, he'd had it tough as a kid. Now he was a jockey starting to make the grade and dreaming the big dream: a fine house, good clothes—and a hundred pairs of shoes. Racing was his job, the center of his dream. Pete wanted it to be clean—and let the best man win.

And, Pete said, jocks were throwing races. He couldn't prove it but he knew it was happening because he could ride alongside the other jocks and see them pulling leather, holding their mounts back. Sometimes owners gave their jocks instructions to hold their mounts back. Sometimes owners gave them instructions that their horse wasn't to finish in the money.

But Pete said this other thing was different. It happened too often, to the wrong horses. And Pete had heard soft-talk, rumors of fixes and payoffs and threats against jocks who weren't supposed to win. Almost always it was the favorite supposed to lose, and a longshot that actually won.

Pete had nosed around, questioned the other jocks. I'd done a pile of routine legwork in Mexico City, checking the books I could find, talking to horseplayers, trying to get a lead to who was putting the fixes in. The picture was pretty conclusive: at the top was a fat guy named Arthur Hammond whom everybody seemed to be scared of. He was from the States, and had once been a trainer. But was ruled off the tracks for life because of shady practices. His retinue was a little mug named Jimmy Rath, and usually a couple of heavies.

Hamond occupied the same table at the track every day. He'd been in a few scraps with the local cops, but never went to jail mainly because he was 'like that' with a Mexican biggie named Valdez. Valdez wasn't a *politico*, but he had almost as much behind-the-scenes power as the President. And Valdez always helped his pals. Always.

Jimmy Rath had got Pete alone yesterday and told him to lose the fifth race today, Thursday, for ten thousand pesos. Pet laughed at him and walked away, reporting the bribe offer to the Racing Commission and later to me. There were no witnesses or corroboration, and consequently no proof. Apparently Rath had just now made his offer again, a little differently.

I asked Pete, "When did this happen? Anybody see it?"

"No, no, of course not. He send me over to the tack room after the fourth, and boosted the ante to fifteen thousand. Then he say I either lose or get taken care of. I told him to go—well, you know. That's when he hit me, and when I wake up, he's gone."

Elena said angrily. "They ought to do something about that Rath."

"Yeah." As far as I was concerned, the 'they' was rapidly becoming me. My fingers were sticky; I realized I still held the Chiclet in my sweaty hand, and the sugary coating was getting slippery.

I stuck the gum in my coat pocket and looked toward the walking ring. Rath wasn't there. I knew where he probably was—with Hammond and two other bruisers upstairs.

In a few minutes, Pete left to weigh in, and the three of us went back upstairs to our table high in the stands overlooking the beautiful oval track bordered by trees, the green lawn cool and colorful inside it.

A hundred conversations swelled around us, and a constant stream of men and women wound in and out of the tables. It was pleasant and lovely. But mainly I was looking at four men seated a few tables away from us.

Jimmy Rath was there with two bruisers—and Arthur Hammond, a thick bulge of fat puffing over his collar. Rath sitting at the same table was proof enough that Hammond was the boy fixing the races, as far as I was concerned. The Racing Commission and the cops felt differently. And it would take more than hunches to get Hammond because of his pal Valdez.

Suddenly, I stopped paying any attention to Hammond. Something was moving on my leg. Slowly, suggestively. Elena and I sat close together facing the track, and her hand was resting just above my knee, caressing me gently.

I turned and looked at her face close to mine, looked at the rest of her. She was wearing a gray skirt and a pink sweater that covered her up completely, but was still very nearly indecent. A shroud on that body would have looked indecent.

"Cuidadito!" I said. "Be careful, baby. Two more seconds and another inch, and I'll go screeching around the track with the horses."

She smiled, wiggled long lashes. My spine wiggled. "I will be careless," she said. "You do not look enough at me." Her hand moved. I moved. I had never been alone with Elena since Pete introduced us, but I knew if I ever was, there'd be plenty happening.

I put my hand over hers and said, "Honey, you want me to fall down frothing?"

The question was gone from her eyes now; only the answer was there. I started to tell her a terrible lie about what frothing meant, but right then the high, fast notes of the bugle sounded, and the announcer said the horses were coming onto the track for the *quinta carrera*, the fifth race.

Elena took her hand away, and I put it back, and then the horses were passing in front of us. I saw Pete in bright red-and-white silks up on *Jetboy*, a black five-year-old gelding with clean, graceful lines.

I expected Pete to look up and nod or wave, but he went right on past, his head slightly bent.

I realized I didn't have a bet down on *Jetboy,* so I went down to the mutual windows and bought two fifty-peso win tickets. *Jetboy* as one to two, the odds—on favorite. By the time I'd reached the table again, the race had already started. I sat down beside Elena, stuck the two tickets into my pocket and my fingers hit the sticky gum.

I pulled it out, started to throw it away. Then I noticed that the white coating had melted and there was what appeared to be a hole pushed into the gum. I squinted at it, spread the thing with my fingernails. There was a hole, all right, with a white powdery stuff inside it. It hit me all at once, and I jumped to my feet just as the crowd did, except they were yelling about the race.

The horses were charging down the far side of the track, opposite the stands, and *Jetboy* trailed the fifth-place horse by four lengths. Usually Pete stayed closer than that, but he wasn't riding as smoothly as he usually did. I knew damn well why, and my heart jumped up into my mouth as he started his move on the last turn.

The crowd was jumping up and down as *Jetboy* reached the fourth spot close behind the bunched leaders. I watched Pete slumped over the saddle, riding sloppily, not like a kid with thirty-nine winners behind him—and then he tried to go through on the inside, and I bunched my hands into tight fists and almost squeezed my eyes shut. He couldn't make it. There just wasn't room and I knew he couldn't make it. I guess he knew too.

I was yelling at the top of my lungs as I saw *Jetboy* practically brushing the hard, sharp wooden rail. The whip came down again, and it all happened in a second.

Jetboy leaped forward, running up on the heels of the horse ahead, stumbled, fell. I saw Pete hurtle through the air like a bundle of rags, slam into the rail—and in the sudden shocked silence of the crowd I thought I could hear him hit. He fell to the dirt track, rolled and lay still as the horse sprinted down toward the finish line.

I heard Vera's piercing scream, and then, intuitively, I looked toward Hammond's table. He was watching the finish of the race, more interested in that than Pete's crumpled body.

I SNAPPED OUT of it, whirled and ran down the steps, sprinting toward the track. By the time I reached the rail, the huddle of doctors and officials cleared away, and Pete was lying there with a white sheet over his body and head, and there was nothing else I could do. Except break Hammond in two. Clear down the middle. Like a god-

damn match-stick that didn't have a chance.

I ran back up the steps, the fury hot in me now, my hands itching. I saw Vera lying in a faint at our table, Elena bending over her. I didn't stop. I walked straight to Hammond's table.

None of the men looked up until I stopped alongside them. Hammond was on my right, facing the track. Opposite me and on my left were the two musclemen, and Rath sat with his back to me. I could feel the muscles around my mouth twitching, jerking.

I put my palms flat down on the table, and Hammond glanced up, his fat pink face gleaming slightly with perspiration, his thick lips dry. "Yeah?" he asked.

"Don't 'yeah' me, you fat ugly son," I shouted.

There was a slight movement behind me. I reached out without turning, slapping Rath backhanded, knocking him out of his chair. His head cracked against the iron rail, and he let out a yell and started to jump up.

"Wait a minute," Hammond said. "Wait a minute. What's this all about?"

"You don't know, huh, Hammond? You haven't the faintest idea!"

An empty glass in front of Hammond held several colored tickets. His program was open in front of him, with Number 2 circled—a horse named *Ladkin*. I looked at

the tote board where the winning numbers were already lighted under the *'Oficial'* sign: 2, 3, 6, 1. *Ladkin* was the winner at fourteen to one. Another sleeper. Hammond didn't stop me as I picked up the glass and dumped out his tickets.

There were twenty fifty-peso win tickets on Number 3, and ten win tickets on Number 4. Nothing on the winner. For a few seconds it puzzled me, but only for a few seconds. Those heavy bets were enough to push the odds on *Ladkin* up to fourteen to one.

"Hammond," I said, "you usually bet two horses to win in the same race? A question, fat boy."

His pink face grew pinker and for the first time he got nasty. He leaned toward me, his face angry. "Give a listen, Scott. I heard all I care to hear right now. I know you been poking your ugly nose in the wrong holes, you hear me? You

keep it up, you never will get Stateside."

"It isn't just a fixed race now, fat boy. It's murder."

"Murder, my backside! The kid made a bad ride, that's all. Everybody makes a bad ride every now and—"

I didn't wait for more. Half a dozen partly-filled plates of food were on the table, some highballs. I lifted the edge of the table and the whole damn mess against Hammond's belly. He tried to scoot back, but the plates and glasses slid off the table as it hit him, and food and liquor smeared his tan suit.

The big goon on my left reached for me, but I was more concerned about Rath. His right hand jerked under his coat and before he had a chance to get whatever he was reaching for, I hit him with the side of my hand, hard, on his right shoulder. He yelled like a madman, his fingers spreading wide in pain, and then Hammond shouted, "Hold it! Rath! Kelly! Knock it off. Quick."

I'd thought we were going to have a real knockdown brawl right there, but Hammond apparently didn't want it that way. Rath hesitated, then obediently sat down. Kelly followed suit, but a little more slowly.

Hammond glared at me, his eyes narrowed to angry slits. He brushed at the slop in his lap and said, "You'll regret this, Scott. You're gonna be goddamn sorry for this, you hear me?"

He looked around the table and jerked his head, then got ponderously to his feet. The four of them left. Nothing else happened. It surprised me, but I didn't worry about it. I went back to my own table.

A half hour later, after Vera had dazedly spoken with a track doctor in the emergency clinic and looked once more at Pete, we left. She didn't break down till we reached Pete's car. As we drove away she lay flat on the back seat, her fingers clutching at the cushions and her body shaking with sobs.

Vera didn't want to go home, so we took her to her mother's house where she could be with her family. Then Elena and I flagged a *libre,* one of the taxis, drove to her apartment in Lomas Colony, and I took her to her door.

Before I left, she said, "Shell, you must be careful. It is very bad, I know, but go with care. Perhaps —another time we can be happier together."

"Sure Elena, I'll keep in touch."

She moved close to me, kissed me gently, lightly on the mouth, then went inside.

In the cab again I told the driver to head toward the Prado. There were a lot of things I wanted to do, but first I was going to get my gun and strap it on. I knew I was going to get Hammond and Rath, one way or another, but I didn't know

how. Hammond had a lot of protection, power on his side, and you can't convict a man for murder—or even fixing races—because he buys tickets on losing horses.

I was still trying to figure a way to get Hammond when the cab driver yelled, *"Madre Dio!"* and grabbed for the wheel as if it were a life preserver. A big Packard cut close to our fender, ramming its nose ahead of the cab. The cabbie jerked the wheel all the way over to his right, and jammed on the brakes so suddenly that I almost flew into the front seat. The cab skidded along the road, almost slamming into the Packard, and then shuddered to a stop.

We were on the Reforma, far from town still, and in a wooded section. Trees grew at the right of the road and there was little traffic here. One of Hammond's bruisers was jumping from the side door of the Packard and starting back toward us, a gun in his fist. There were a couple other guys behind him.

I didn't wait to identify them. I threw the cab's door open and leaped out. I started to run into the trees, but a gun cracked and I heard the bullet whistle by me. The guy yelled something at me from no more than ten feet away. I'd had it. There wasn't a chance I could get into the trees before a slug hit me. I stopped.

I heard one footstep as I started to turn, but I never made it around. Probably it was a gun butt, but whatever it was, it was solid, and it landed on my skull.

They were dragging me when I came to and when I tried to move they stopped and dropped me. Somebody told me to get up, and in a minute I made it. We were deeper in the trees, and my company was Kelly, the other strong-arm man, and Rath.

Rath stood in front of me while the other two grabbed my arms and slammed my back against a tree, pulling my arms behind me around the tree trunk. And then Rath started in on me.

He was methodical about it, but it seemed to give him a sadistic pleasure. First he looked up at me from his approximate five-nine and said, "You sure made a fool of yourself today, Scott. You sure made the boss mad. We oughta plug you, but too many people saw that beef. We're gonna teach you to lay off us, though." He grinned. "After this, we figure you'll get a plane back to the States."

He waited till he'd told me all that, then he hit me. He hit me in the stomach, but I was braced for the blow and Rath wasn't an especially powerful man, anyway. The first time he hit me it didn't hurt so much. But along about the tenth time in the same spot it was getting bad.

Once, while I still had the strength, I lifted one foot and tried to kick him in what is politely

called the groin, but he got out of the way. Then he took a gun from one of the guys holding me, and slammed it along my jaw twice. My legs suddenly weren't strong enough to support me, and I sagged lower, my arms bending up behind me till it felt as if they'd pop out of their sockets.

Rath's face filmed with perspiration and a little saliva drooled from the corner of his mouth. He kept grinning all the time, enjoying himself. He'd hit me and the air would gush out of my mouth; everything swam in front of me and finally Rath was just a blur of movement that meant pain.

I realized the blows had stopped. A hand ripped my shirt open and I tried to lift my head. Rath slapped me several times then said, "Look, Scott."

My eyes focused slowly on the knife in his hand. I saw it move back and forth, then the point pressed against my chest. "See how easy to kill you?" Rath said. His voice was taut and excited, like that of man in bed with a woman. "See?" he said. He pushed on the knife a little and I felt the point bite into my chest, slice through the skin and flesh.

I almost yelled aloud, tried to press back against the tree, suck in my chest and go away from that blade. Rath laughed, pulled the knife away and held it before my eyes, let me see the red-stained tip. "So get out of Mexico, Scott. Or next time I push this thing all the way in."

He ran the honed edge down the front of my chest, cutting the skin, not deep but painfully. Then he stepped back. The men behind me let go of my arms and I fell forward on my face, unable to stand. My cheek pressed against the dirt and I saw Rath's pointed shoe leave the ground and felt it dig into my side. Then there was a blow on my head again and welcome blackness swept over me.

I must have lain there unconscious for quite a while because it was nearly dark when I came out of it. When I tried to move I gasped as pain leaped through my stomach and chest. I bit my lip, grunting, as I got slowly to my feet and started trying to find the road. I could move only a few feet before I had to stop and rest. Finally I reached the Reforma and flagged a *libre* to stop.

"Get me to a doctor," I told him.

DOCTOR DOMINGUEZ pressed the last wide strip of adhesive tape against my chest and said, "There, you don't seem to have internal injuries, but we'd better get you to the hospital."

"I told you I haven't got time for that." My brain was alert enough now; I simply hurt like hell. "Just so I'm not bleeding inside, doc, and nothing's busted."

"At least you should go to bed and stay there."

I couldn't explain to him that there wasn't room in my mind for thinking about hospitals or beds. The fat face of Hammond and the thin features of Rath, and the white, dead face of Pete Ramirez took up all the room there was in my mind. I wouldn't have been able to think about anything else even if I'd wanted to. And I didn't want to.

Before he'd started working on me I'd given Doctor Dominguez the cube of gum still in my pocket, the Chiclet, and told him what I suspected. Half an hour after he finished bandaging me he had the other answer.

"Yes, Mr. Scott," he said, "it was drugged. Crude, too. Somebody merely hollowed out a small space inside the gum and filled it with powder."

"Would it kill a man?"

He frowned. "It might. Hard to say. It would at least make him sluggish, drowsy. Why? Where did you get this?"

"Arthur Hammond gave it to a jockey who was killed today."

He got slightly green. "Ah—no, you must be mistaken. Mr. Hammond is a well thought of man." It was obvious the name Hammond frightened him. He said, less warmly, professional now, "That is all I can do for you."

It was also obvious he wanted to get rid of me. I paid him, asked him to call me a cab, and left.

I stood outside the Rio Roas, a nightclub near Insurgentes, pain constant in my chest and stomach. I'd got a morphine surette from the doctor, but it was in my pocket. I figured I might need it more later than I did right now. From the Doc's I'd gone to the Prado and picked up my gun. Then I had started hunting for any one of the four men I was after. But now, three hours later, this was the only lead I had. I'd checked the phone

book—no Hammond. A man with as many enemies as Hammond undoubtedly had doesn't advertise his address.

I'd checked every crumb I knew in Mexico City, and plenty I didn't know. Hammond's address was a complete mystery. Almost all I'd learned was that a lot of people were afraid of Hammond and his thugs—and of Hammond's pal, Valdez. But I learned that a couple of months ago Jimmy Rath had paid the rent on an apartment for a girl named Chatita, who was now in the show here at Rio Rosa, and

apparently didn't like Rath any more. I went inside.

For fifty pesos the headwaiter let me knock on the door of Chatita's dressing room. When she opened the door, her eyes widened with surprise. I guess I didn't look very handsome, with my jaw swollen and a cut in the flesh over my cheekbone.

I said, "May I talk to you for a minute?"

She looked at my bruised face, frowning. "I am sorry," she said. "I must get dressed."

Now that I took a look at her, she was right. She had on a silk wrapper thin enough so that her full breasts showed through it. She started to shut the door and I took a chance. "It's about Jimmy Rath."

I got more than I bargained for. "Jimmy!" she said venomously. She opened the door wide, looked at my face again. "Did he do this to you?"

I nodded and she said, "Come in."

She shut the door behind me, locked it, then turned to face me. "Sit down," she said pointing toward a wooden chair. "You—do not like Jimmy?"

"I hate him," I said. "I want to find him and tell him so."

She smiled. It wasn't a very nice smile. "I hope you find him," she said. "I hope you beat him to death."

This Chatita was tall, close to six feet in her high heels, and she would have towered above Rath. He was shaping up as a queer one. Chatita had the sensual, smooth-skinned face found on many of the lovely Mexican women, with large dark eyes and a mass of black hair. Her face had a hot beauty that went with her full-curved body.

"Where can I find him?" I asked.

"I wish I knew. How do you know I once knew him?"

"I heard you were friendly. Not any more, huh?"

She walked toward me, stood in front of the chair I sat in. "I am an *exotica,*" she said. "A dancer." She meant, I figured, that she did a strip act. She went on, "My body, it assures me a living, a job."

I didn't know what she was getting at, but I nodded.

"My body," she said, "it is good. It is to be proud of." She had been holding the thin robe around her. Now she parted it, and slid it down from her shoulders as she faced me.

She wore brief step-ins beneath it nothing else. And she did have a lovely body, full and voluptuously curving. Her breasts were large, firm, erect. I didn't know why she had so suddenly pulled the robe from her shoulders, but soon I understood.

Her flat stomach was a criss-cross of scratches where someone had been practicing surgery there with a sharp knife. "You see," she said. "That is from Jimmy. I hope

you find him." She bit her lip. "My body he has made ugly. *Ugly!*" She pulled the robe back over her shoulders.

She sat in a chair before the dressing table and we talked for a few minutes. When she'd known Rath, he had lived in Arthur Hammond's house—but she didn't know where the house was. It seemed no one knew where the fat ugly son lived. Except for that she couldn't help me, though she gave me a better picture of Rath himself.

"He is evil," she said. "Insanely evil. He bought me expensive things, but I could not stay. I was with him one month. The cuts, they are from the knife he carries always." She hesitated, then went on. "Even in bed. He would hold it here—" she pointed to her throat —"when he . . . . at the moment when . . ." She didn't finish it, but I knew what she meant.

After a pause she continued, as if she wanted to share what she knew with somebody else, "He wanted me to hurt him. He liked to hurt and be hurt. Twice he gave to me the knife, asking that I hurt him with it. Carefully, he would say, carefully. But I could not do it and he would become angry, frightening. Then, one night, he did this to me." She touched her stomach.

She was quiet for a minute. I had already told her that if I found Rath I was going to break several of his bones, and she said, "If you do find him, remind him of this. Will you, for me?" Her fingers moved slowly over her stomach beneath her silk robe again. "It would help me," she said, "because there is inside me much hate for him."

"I'll remind him, Chatita. If there's time."

I started to get up normally, forgetting my bruises, and flopped back into the chair. The next try I made it moving slowly. Chatita stepped to me and took my arm, her pretty face softening for the first time.

"I did not know you were hurt so. You hate him as much as I, no?"

"Maybe more, Chatita. You probably make the cuts worse in your mind than they really are. To a man, they mean nothing. Believe me. You're a beautiful and desirable woman."

I could hear her breathing quicken. Her tongue moved over her lower lip. "Thank you," she said. "It is good of you to say that, but it is not true."

"It is true."

Under different circumstances, I don't think I'd have got out of there before morning. But I left. Before she closed the door she smiled at me and said. "Thank you. Perhaps—perhaps it is true."

I grinned, said, "You damn bet it is," and staggered out of the place.

AT TWO IN the morning I gave up and went back to my room at the del Prado. I hadn't learned anything except what Chatita had told me, and by two o'clock I felt like a walking hamburger. I went to bed.

Getting up in the morning and getting dressed was a solid half hour of agony. I had been bad enough before I slept, but now my muscles had stiffened and every movement was torture. I was two-hundred-plus pounds of pain—and hate. But the hate was stronger than the pain.

I walked around the room for another half hour working my arms, bending, stretching gingerly, until I'd got some of the stiffness out of my body. Then I had breakfast and started hunting again. I knew if everything else failed I could spot the men I wanted at the track, but there were no more races until Saturday. I checked the phone books again—no Hammond listed.

At five o'clock in the afternoon I came out of a bar on Bucareli. I'd heard it was a hangout for Kelly, and I'd hoped to get some information. All I got was blank stares. But I found Kelly—and Rath.

When I came out, they were waiting for me in the big Packard, a custom job with a low two-digit license plate which shouted that this was an important car and to keep out of its way. Kelly was behind the wheel and Rath stood outside, leaning against the door. When he saw me, he walked over to me.

The street was crowded, but the gripe and fury and hate boiled up inside me when I saw him and I reached for him.

He said sharply, "Hold it. You want the girls hurt?"

That stopped me. "What do you mean, you little pile of—"

"Watch it," he said. I didn't like the casual, confident way he was talking. He knew I could bend him till he broke, but he said, "We told you to beat it, Scott. You got no sense at all. Now listen. There's a plane out at seven. You be on it. You don't want nothing to happen to those girls, do you?"

"What girls?"

"Vera, and Elena Angel. You kind of like that Elena's pretty face—and things. Don't you, Scott? She's a real hot-looking tamale. Be a shame if something happened to

her. It will, Scott, unless you get lost fast."

I wanted to get my hands on this guy so bad it was hard for me to think, but that penetrated. When it did, I started cooling down. My heart slowed and thudded heavily in my chest. But finally I realized he had me over a barrel. If I kept nosing around, I might get Vera and Elena hurt or killed. The thought of Rath getting his slimy hands on either one of them, especially Elena, turned my stomach.

Rath said, "You get out tonight, and we leave the gals alone." He shook his head. "Sure hate to miss gettin' next to that Elena, though."

I grabbed him, jerked him to me. "I'm going to take you apart!"

He swallowed, but he said, "So help me, they'll get it. Let go. Let go of me. They'll get it sure."

"All right. I'll—quit. But if you lay a hand on either of them, I'll kill you."

He grinned. "Seven o'clock. There'll be somebody at the airport to make sure you blow."

Rath climbed into the car and they left. I went back into the bar, got the bar phone and shooed the bartender away. It had occurred to me that Rath would hardly have been so cocky—unless he *already* had one or both of the girls somewhere.

Elena didn't have a phone, but I called Vera's mother, got Vera and made sure she was all right. I told her to stay put, not go out alone. Then I hung up, grabbed a cab and told the driver to step on it. Sick worry built up in me and I kept seeing Elena's face, the dark eyes. I could almost feel the caress of her fingers and the cool pressure of her lips.

In Lomas we stopped in front of the apartments and I ran up and banged on Elena's door. It was unlocked and swung open. The apartment was empty. One blue slipper lay inside the front door. One. Its mate was nowhere in the apartment. There didn't seem to be any sign of a struggle.

But in the bedroom I found a blouse and skirt, bra and panties folded neatly on a chair under which were shoes and stockings. The bathroom door was open and I went inside. The floor was wet in and near the shower, and a wet towel hung from the rack.

Elena had been here not long ago, had showered. But her clothes were still outside on the chair. They must have forced their way in and taken her just the way she was, maybe in a robe or coat from the closet, something to cover her nakedness. And I still didn't have any idea where they might have gone. I knew I couldn't trust Rath —or any of them. If I left on that plane tonight, there was no telling what would happen to Elena. But if I didn't leave . . .

I went into the bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed. I'd already gone over half the town, asking

questions, threatening, trying to buy or beg information, and I'd got nothing solid. There had to be some other way. I racked my brain—an thought of something. It was a two-digit license number that I remembered seeing on a custom Packard.

It took me an hour, and thirty-five hundred pesos, which was a lot of money, especially in Mexico. Over four hundred dollars, but it was worth it. I paid the money to a police officer and learned that the license plates had been issued to Arthur L. Hammond at an address in Cuernavaca—fifty miles away over a curving, dangerous road.

I rented the fastest car I could find and pushed the accelerator down all the way and kept it down except when not slowing would be suicide. I couldn't be sure Elena would be at Hammond's, but it seemed likely.

Chatita had told me Rath lived at Hammond's. I remembered the other things she'd told me too, and I thought with revulsion, almost with horror, of Rath's hands on Elena's soft body, his knife at her throat . . . I kept the accelerator down.

It's usually more than an hour's drive to Cuernavaca from Mexico, but I made it in forty minutes. My watch said seven-fifteen when I cut the car lights and coasted to a stop near the big house where I knew Hammond lived. Three minutes at a service station, after I told the attendant the address, had given me the location.

But three minutes were three too many. They'd know by now that I hadn't left on that seven o'clock plane. I took out my gun, checked it. Driving had loosened my muscles, but the pain that had been with me all day was even worse, and I wanted to be able to move fast, without pain slowing me.

I took the morphine surette from my pocket, pulled up my sleeve and jammed the hollow needle into my arm, squeezed half of the morphine into my blood. I knew how it would affect me, that it would keep me keyed up, and make me a little light-headed. But it would kill the pain enough so I'd be nearly normal—and it wouldn't slow me down or blur my brain too much.

I got out of the car and walked through darkness toward the house. The Packard was parked in the driveway. Lights burned in the lower floor of the house, and thick vines covered the walls. I walked to the rear of the house, feeling the morphine working, easing the ache. My skin tingled slightly.

I heard a scream, suddenly stifled. It had come from the back of the house here, above me. On the second floor, light spilled from an open window and I heard a short cry again—from the brightly lighted room.

Ugly pictures crawled in my mind as I stared at the lighted window, then walked toward the wall beneath it. Vines covered the entire wall, but I didn't know if they'd support my weight. Like a lot of the Cuernavaca houses, this one had small *terrazas* or balconies at many of the windows, including the one I wanted to reach.

I pulled at one of the vines, let my body hang from it. It sagged, rustling and scraping slightly against the wall, but it didn't break.

I was a bit light-headed now, buoyant. I felt incredibly strong. And I was completely unafraid of what might happen to me. But there were no more sounds from the window above, and that scared me. I took off my shoes and pulled myself up the vines, finding spots to place my feet, straining upward with all the strength in my arms.

It seemed to take hours instead of minutes, as if time had been distorted. My outstretched hand touched the rim of the balcony and I wrapped my fingers around it, pulled myself up and stepped over the rail.

I could see into the room, see part of a bed, a bare leg in my line of vision. I moved to my right, taking the .38 Colt from its holster. Elena lay naked on the bed, huddled against the headboard. There was fear in her eyes, and revulsion. The muscles along her flat stomach rippled with terror, and

her bosom heaved as she drew in a frightened breath.

I couldn't see anybody else. With the revolver tight in my right hand I bent and went through the open window fast. Elena jerked on the bed, rolled to one side and I looked toward her as I stepped inside the room. But even as I looked in her direction I sensed, more than I saw, movement on my right.

I spun around bringing up the gun as Rath jumped toward me, his thin face twisted and ugly, and the gleaming knife in his right fist slashing up from his side toward my belly. Instinctively I thrust my hands at the slashing blade and felt it slice against my wrist, felt the jar against my gun just before

it slipped from my hand and fell to the floor.

Rath jerked his hand back, thrust at me again with the knife, and I stepped aside. It seemed that I had all the time in the world and as the point of the knife leaped at me I slapped my hand past its arc and clamped my fingers on Rath's thin wrist. My other hand shot to his elbow, jerked as I pressed downward on his wrist.

In the slow motion of my mind I saw the knife turn to point at his chest, my fingers slipping down to cover his hand and imprison the knife there as he shouted in sudden pain. I gripped his elbow tight, then shoved with all my strength against Rath's hand.

The hand went back, carrying the knife against his chest. Slowly the knife went in, slowly, an inch, and then two, and it was as though no fine flesh and muscle and tendons were there to stop the thin steel as it sank deeper into his chest until at the end it was buried there.

Rath staggered back, his mouth twisted. Perhaps it was the drug in my veins, or the blood pounding in my head, but it seemed that on his face there grew an expression not of fright or terror, but of an almost unholy pleasure. His lips were pulled back from his teeth and his eyes were stretched wide.

I remembered that Chatita had said Rath liked to be hurt, to feel pain, and he was feeling pain now. Deadly pain.

He stood quite still for seconds, facing me as his hands crept up to the handle of the knife and tugged gently at it. Then still with that odd, crazed expression on his face he fell forward to his knees. Slowly he topped to the floor, the projecting knife handle holding him at a queer angle. It took him quite a while to die.

I forgot to tell him about Chatita, and I wished I'd remembered. Jimmy Rath had seemed to die too happy.

I picked up the .38 and turned to the bed, every sense and nerve in my body keyed up and tingling. Elena threw herself into my arms, buried her head in my shoulder, and let all the horror and revulsion come out of her in a steady stream of tears.

She whispered, "Shell. Oh, my God, Shell," and then she pressed herself against me, put her arms around me and pulled me close, tight against her body.

She was a wild, frenzied woman for a long minute, savagely alive in my arms, pressing against me, kissing me, clutching and caressing me, as if she couldn't thank me enough, as if she were thanking me with everything she owned.

"Elena, honey," I said. "Who else is here?"

She pulled away from me, suddenly remembering where she was, and the danger around us.

"Hammond is here. That is all." She spoke in short phrases, her

breathing as unsteady as my own. "Rath was . . . just getting ready to—" She shuddered. "I thought he was going to kill you with the knife. We heard something outside. I did not know what or who it was. When I saw you, I thought he would kill you."

I got off the bed, moved away from her, the gun in my hand again. "What about the others?"

"Hammond only is here. Downstairs. I do not know where." She paused. "Shell, what are you going to do?"

I grinned at her, the blood pounding through my veins, thundering in my head. "I'm going to kill him."

She licked her lips and leaned back on the bed, staring at me with her arms behind her, and her stomach sucked in sharply, the long smooth sweep of thigh and leg extending to the floor. She didn't speak.

I LEFT HER there and went out. I found stairs leading into darkness below me and I walked down them, swaying a little. Then there was a hallway, light seeping under a door. I opened the door, stepped quietly inside.

Arthur Hammond stood at a bookcase on my right, his back to me. On his left a few feet away was a polished desk. There was a snub-nosed revolver on its top, out of place and ugly against the gleaming wood. Hammond's coat was off and I could see the strap of a shoulder harness he was still wearing. He must have taken the gun from its holster and put it on the desk top once he was safe in his home. He hadn't yet heard me.

I pointed my gun at his back, thumbed the hammer on full cock, let my finger tighten ever so lightly on the trigger.

"Hammond," I said softly.

He turned, placing his finger between the pages of a book he held in his hands. "What?" He blinked at me. For an eternity he stared at me, uncomprehending, then his features slackened as if the muscles that held his face to the skull were dissolving beneath the skin. His jaw sagged, his puchy cheeks drooped, and he began to tremble.

"No, no," he said, his voice quavering. "Wait. Please, please wait." I could hardly hear him. His voice was a whisper floating in the room.

"This is it, Hammond," I said. "For killing Pete Ramirez. For a lot of things that you've done."

"I didn't kill him. I didn't." He said the same thing five or six times, unable to take his eyes from the bore of the gun I pointed at him. My finger almost trembled on the trigger.

The gun had a soft pull and I knew just a breath more pressure and the hammer would fall, the pin would strike, the slug would rip into Hammond's fat, quivering body. He knew it, too. He kept

talking, repeating the same words over many times, but he never stopped, as if he knew that once he stopped speaking, a bullet would slam into him, rip into his heart or his brain.

"I didn't kill him. It was a drug. In the gum. It couldn't kill him. Please. It was Rath, he gave it to him, put it in his pocket after he hit him. The kid wasn't supposed to get killed, just lose the race. I had to make him lose."

"But it killed him, Hammond, as surely as if you'd shot him. He might have died even if he hadn't fallen."

That was the first time I'd spoken for quite a while, and it seemed to break the almost hypnotic spell that had gripped him. He put his hands out in front of him and moved sideways a little—toward the desk.

He reached to his cheek and pinched it hard, unconscious of the movement. "Let me go, Scott," he said.

I shook my head.

"Not a chance," I said.

"I haven't done anything. You were right about the races, but I didn't mean to kill Ramirez. I had to win. I'd already wired the name of the winner, Ladkin, to the men in Los Angeles. He had to win. They'd have killed me." He kept moving slowly toward the desk. His body hid the gun from my sight now, but his hands were still in front of him.

"What men in Los Angeles, Hammond?"

He gave me some names, rapidly. They didn't mean anything to me—but they would to Cookie Martini. Then he said, "I'll make you rich if you let me go, Scott. We pick the winner here and bet on the other horses to make the odds right. There's books in the States, and some here, that take Mexico bets. There's millions in it. I'll make you rich." His right hand rested on the edge of the desk behind him.

"How do you pick the winner, Hammond?" Just a little more time, I thought. He was going to try it soon. He kept edging closer to the gun.

"We know, from friends, when a horse is ready for a good race. About the jockeys, we—bought a couple. One other was married, stepping out with a chippie, and we held that over him. Ramirez was just—a mistake. Be sensible, Scott. You can take me in to the cops, but they won't keep me. You know Valdez? He won't let a rap stick. He'll cover for me, fix any charges. There's no proof anyway. You can't win, Scott. And I'll give you a hundred thousand dollars."

"That's not enough." His hand was out of sight behind him now. I knew he had his hand on the gun, was just working up his nerve, pushing himself to the point where he could make his try. And I knew Hammond was telling the truth. I

couldn't make a charge against him stick. Not here. And Valdez would get him out of any mess I got him into.

"I'll give you more, anything—anything you want."

"It's not enough."

He bit his lips. "You're a fool, Scott. Every man has a price. You've got your price, too. I know it." His voice got higher and louder as he kept on. "You're stupid, stupid. I can pay you. You're—"

It was a damnfool thing to do, but he did it. He dropped suddenly to the floor, his face as frightened as any face I've ever seen, but he swept the gun out in front of him, firing before the gun was pointed within a yard of me.

He would have kept on firing, too, but I put that extra breath of pressure on the .38 trigger and it roared and flame spat toward Hammond's belly. He jerked as the slug struck and then I fired again, saw the small hole appear over his heart.

He slumped back against the desk and his head fell forward. He still had the gun in his hand, though, and I couldn't take any chances. I shot him in the head. Yeah, that was sure a damnfool thing for Hammond to do. But I had to pull the trigger. I had to defend myself. Hell, he was going to shoot me.

He didn't move any more. He wouldn't. I couldn't help thinking that Hammond had been right: like everybody else, I had my price—and he'd just paid it. And I also thought that Valdez would have a hell of a time getting Hammond out of this mess.

There were still a few tag ends, including Kelly and the other strong-arm boy, but they could wait. I left Hammond on the floor and went out, back up the stairs. Most of all, I wanted to get the hell out of there before any of the boys showed up. Taking care of them was one thing. Meeting them in their own backyard was another. I ran up the stairs quickly.

When I opened the door, Elena was still on the bed but her hands were pressed tightly against her eyes. I shut the door behind me. Slowly she took her hands from her eyes and looked at me. She looked at me for a long time as the fright left her face. When she spoke her voice was tight.

"I'm going to pieces, Shell. I was going crazy. I heard the shots. I—thought it might be you. And I wanted you to come back to me." She bit her lips and moved slightly on the bed, the light gleaming dully on her nakedness.

"Get a coat on," I said. "Fast. We've got to get the hell out of here."

I was still feeling high, the blood still rushing through my veins, setting up a terrible din in my head. She grabbed a coat from the closet, a man's raincoat, shivered

into it, and took one last look at Jimmy Rath, dead and bloody on the floor.

"Let's go," she said, turning away. "Let's get the hell out of here, Shell."

SHE WAS STILL wearing the raincoat much later, but it wasn't covering a hell of a lot of her. It was open at the throat, spread in a wide V that gashed down to the tightly belted waist. Her legs were tucked under her on the sofa, in her apartment, and I was sitting next to her and marveling about the wonderful raincoats they were turning out these days.

The drug had worn off now, but who the hell needed it any more. I leaned toward her, pulling her close to me. She ran a hand over the tape on my chest.

Her face was an inch from mine when she said softly, her eyes heavy-lidded and her mouth slack with passion, "You are hurt. But I will be careful with you, my Shell, You will see how very gentle I can be."

I pulled her tight against me, kissed the corner of her mouth, her cheek, then with my lips against her ear I whispered, "Elena, honey, you can be as careless as you like."

Some of Next Month's Headliners

INSIDE JOB by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New Mike Shayne Novelet

THE DEATH OF A BUM by DONALD S. WESTLAKE

A New Abraham Levine Novelet

THE RED HAIRING by G. G. FICKLING

The Very First HONEY WEST Short Story

BIRTHDAY PRESENT by RICHARD DEMING

AND THE SUMMER'S YOUNG YET by SYD HOFF

FIFTY-FIFTY by HILDA CUSHING

Featuring

ED NOON

THE THING IN EVENING DRESS

The Professor was both a horror expert . . . and a deadly menace to himself.

by

MICHAEL AVALLONE

EMILY HARPER'S cocktail party had become one of those totally boring affairs that need a front-page battle royal to give them any meaning. The guests, Broadway drunks and social butterflies, were beginning to look at each other in that owl-eyed way that shouts to the rooftops, "Oh, my God, what am I doing talking to this moron?" I was asking myself

the same question as I watched Feodor down his tenth highball. I was counting because he'd asked me to tag along. What a noted botanist needed a private detective for was beyond me. But a job is a job.

The eminent Professor Anton Feodor had made a spectacle of himself to the delighted howls of a jaded evening crowd. His manner was now excessive, his bearded chin sagged after the forming of first words and his eyes seemed to be swimming in pools of alcohol. His starched shirt-front was proof of the inaccuracy of his aim 'twixt the cup and the lip. The good Professor had made every unforgivable slip in the Emily Post handbook.

I anchored his elbow, ignored the universal wail of disappointment from the assorted joy seekers and guided him from their drunken territory. It was high time for a respected, world-renowned botanist to be planted safely in his own bed.

The things the Professor had babbled about all night had been enough to certify his one-too-many condition, anyway. Remarks about werewolves and other beasts from the forests of the night you won't find in any zoo are not made in my circles. I was kid enough to feel a little goose-pimply about such stuff, but man enough to play out the mistake and see the old fool home.

Emily Harper materialized at the door, the perfect hostess without toppers. She patted Feodor's sleepy head and smiled at me, showing very white teeth. Miss Harper was the second most publicized lady of letters of the newspaper world, but I smelled a well-perfumed rat.

"Tuck him in among his test tubes, will you, Mr. Noon? It's no wonder he has a big head. All that wild talk about men changing into ghostly animals. Werewolves and were-leopards. Good Grief! Back and forth, back and forth."

"Instant wishful thinking," I said.

Her eyebrows rose. "I suppose lots of odd things happened on that last expedition of his. But I'd never dream of shaming him by writing down anything he said tonight. They'd cart him off to a laughing academy."

"A nice girl like you wouldn't do that anyway," I suggested through closed teeth.

"Of course not. It was just the liquor talking, wasn't it?"

"Of course. Good night, Miss Harper. Happy headlines."

"Good night, Mr. Noon," she said and disappeared behind the large, gilded door.

It clicked behind her gowned perfection. I forgot about her, got a firm grip on the drowsy Professor and piloted him across the smooth floor to the bank of elevators. I took the one on the right.

The job wasn't easy. The Professor was not lightweight and his top hat bobbed like a cork on the summit of his high forehead. He had the kind of expansive dome nine eggheads out of ten would have envied.

I managed to prop him against the wall, holding him upright with one hand as I pressed the down button quickly. I let him loll against the wall, fishing in my rented tails for a cigarette. A hum of oiled mechanism sounded in the stillness of the corridor.

I felt genuinely sorry for him. All those months in the Himalayas had apparently unbalanced him, and he hadn't gotten over the experience yet, by the look of him. His deepset eyes were bloodshot, and all his far-out talk about savage beasts that prowled about campfires like men on all fours wasn't exactly calculated to make him a social asset at a late-afternoon cocktail party.

There are a lot of people who hate that sort of thing. I wondered what *had* happened to the Professor out there in Shangri-La country? He would have made more converts if he'd claimed he'd had a coffee break with the Abominable Snowman. At least that would have been open for scientific argument. But werewolves went out with the fiftieth TV rerun of *"The Werewolf Of London."*

The elevator doors glided open

and I steadied Feodor into the car, and pushed another button. The car fell slowly.

My thoughts idled on, helped along by the situation and the cigarette. Feodor was a great explorer-scientist with practically a half interest in the Explorer's Geographic. That could excuse a lot of things but tonight's performance was certainly going to tarnish his shining gold stars. Lycanthropy isn't exactly standard science. Strange animal forms were definitely not roaming the valleys of Tibet, no matter how romantic the notion might seem on the surface.

I kept thinking about Emily Harper's invitation to the Professor to come and entertain her guests. The word was going to travel fast that Anton Feodor,

Pulitzer Prize winner, was off his trolley.

I glanced at my watch. Nearly midnight. I drew heavily on the cigarette and remembered suddenly how tired and sleepy I'd been for close to an hour.

When I shifted my right arm to a more comfortable position about the Professor's waist, it felt so numb I was afraid for an instant that my exertion had brought on a stroke. The guy was cast-iron heavy.

The alcohol fumes were strangely missing, despite the close confines of the car. My nostrils puckered. Another aroma—odor really—filled the air. It was a heavy, thickish sort of smell, like stale molasses. I was reminded of the lion house in the bronx Zoo.

The cage whirred downward. Emily Harper's penthouse party had been a long way up.

I watched the arrow indicator over my head. Fourth floor, third, second. As the car slowed the smell persisted, and grew even stronger. And stranger.

The Professor's head jerked when the elevator halted on the lobby floor and his top hat tipped to one side. Only the weight of his square skull mashing it down kept it in place.

"Come on, oldtimer," I urged. "Let's walk out in style. You've had a snootful all right and it's time you slept it off."

The Professor mumbled in his beard. It was more like a growl.

I grinned. The old gent was giving me the willies. I was a grown boy in big, well-lighted Manhattan—a stone Metropolis that knows enough solid, real evil without going in for phantoms and fancies.

The smell *had thickened* though. Like the spoor of a nearby wild animal.

"Come on, Professor," I pleaded. "We'll call a cab, tuck you in and—"

I staggered into the lobby with him. The marble museum was deserted because of the hour, but the curious atmosphere of the elevator was unchanged, even here. Maybe the whole building needed a fumigating.

"Okay, Professor. Now let's just walk across—"

Suddenly—I don't know where it came from—something flat was pressed against the small of my back and a violent shove sent me catapulting across the polished floor of the lobby. Professor Feodor was plucked from my grip on invisible pulleys. I hit a stuffed chair, caromed sideways and went down hard.

I jumped back to my feet in a flash. My top hat had sailed like a paper airplane to the floor. I whirled to confront the practical joker or drunken clown who wanted to play roughhouse games so late in the day.

I stopped—and froze.

You would have done the same.

It must have been weird to see, if anybody had been unlucky enough to walk in at that exact moment.

There was I, at one end of the lobby. A badly frightened man in full dress. Top hat, white tie and tails. At the other end, no more than ten yards away, coiled like an animal ready to spring, was something deadly—and unbelievable.

Something also in evening dress.

Professor Anton Feodor, his face a startling composite of bristly hair, wolf-brows and white fangs, was tottering before me, a nightmare on all fours. I jumped back from him, clawing out the .45 which I always carry, in fair weather or foul.

There it was.

How could I convince a sober and sane New York Police Department that I had shot and killed a *werewolf* in self-defense?

I could have wiped two lives out in one foolish burst of gunfire. But I didn't. Luckily, I can still hold my liquor.

I held it well enough to spring past the reeling Professor and hurtle toward the wide marble staircase leading up to the next floor. There was a flash of silken skirt gleaming ahead of me, wildly running high heels. But she didn't have the speed or my anger to propel her and I caught up with her, half-way up the flight of steps and spun her around savagely. Emily Harper's lovely face was a twisted mask of hate.

"Ghoulish idea, lady," I snapped. "But it won't work. You followed us down, shoved me, slipped that Halloween fright mask on his face and hoped I'd be so hopped up with liquor and the werewolf talk that I'd *shoot* before thinking. Well, I didn't."

"It would have worked," she cried. "And he had it coming—" Her eyes were not quite sane, shining like marbles.

"Why?" I asked, simply. It was all I wanted to know.

The weird look in her eyes wouldn't go away. "My God," she said, nearly crying. "What a story it would have made—you shooting him after all that werewolf talk. I would have gotten the mask away in the excitement, and you would have sworn on a stack of Bibles how his face changed. But now, you've ruined it all!"

The things some reporters will do for a scoop. Or a headline in black crepe lettering.

I had to hold both her wrists to keep her from raking my face to ribbons. By that time, a doorman came running breathlessly to see what all the commotion was about.

Then we called the cops.

"It Was Me Done it to Her," Says Young Jud Harris

It was a brutal slaying and the suspected killer had been hung without a trial. Quite possibly a mistake had been made . . . but guilt can keep an entire village silent.

by BRYCE WALTON

Special to the Atlantic Evening News—August 17:

Lakeville is a tired little town with grass growing out of the sidewalks, and the courthouse sagging in the square. Bill Greene, Lakeville sheriff for twelve years, takes life philosophically, as it comes and goes.

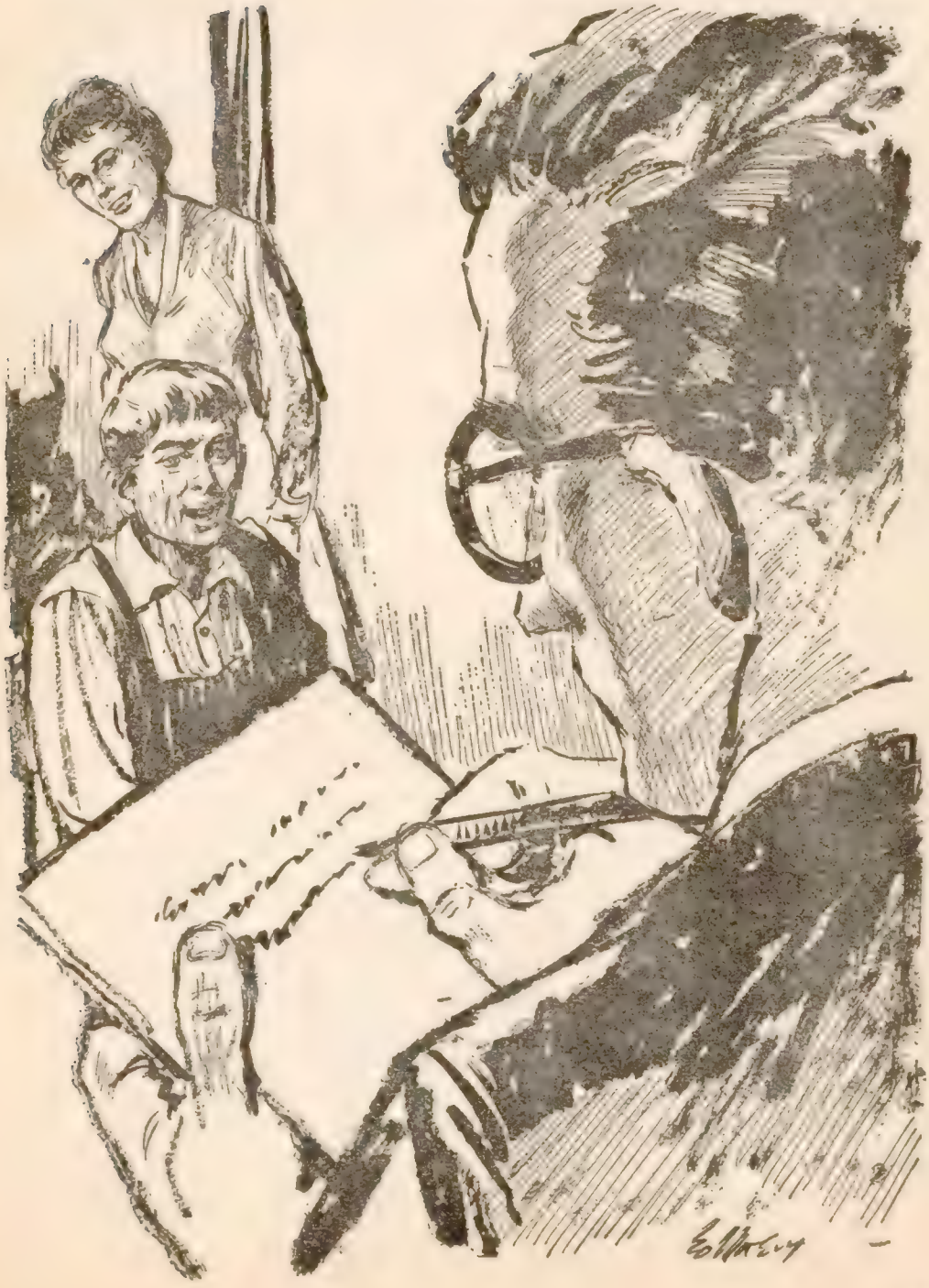
"That's where they hanged him," he said. He pointed to a giant chinaberry tree as we walked across the square. "They busted through the jail and dragged him out like a rabbit out of a hole."

"Any last words?" I asked.

" 'Black is the color of my true love's hair.' " Greene opened the front door of his stationwagon for me and I got in.

"Isn't that a song?" I asked as he frowned in the scalding heat and mopped the top of his bald head with a bandanna.

"He always sang when he was loaded, which was most of his life. If he could have carried a tune the way he carried his booze he'd have been a television star. Way I heard it, they gave him a jug of stump-



hole whiskey after they broke him out. He never did know that it wasn't just a damn fool joke."

Greene got in and started the motor. "Only hanging we've had in the county in my time," he said. "Probably the last, as I'm getting on, and the way things are these days one hanging goes a long way. I know it never is right. But still, you sometimes wonder about justice."

"I'm wondering about it now," I said as he drove off down a side-road churning up red dust.

"Well, he was one of them kind they used to say ought to have been drowned in a rain barrel like a pup before he got his eyes open. He never did a lick of work and bragged about being on county relief. When he wasn't drunk or sleeping one off he was beating his wife and kids. You'll find a solid consensus of opinion in this county that he was about the meanest man God ever breathed life into."

We slowed down until three hogs finished rooting their way across the road.

"I was sort of suspicious of you when you first walked into my office this morning," he said.

"I just want a feature story for my paper," I reassured him.

"I know, but then I thought maybe you was from the FBI."

"No. Strictly from Atlanta. I was born and raised there."

"Cigar?" he said.

We drove across a wooden bridge that scanned a brackish creek, then past a rain-rod steepled church. After that we headed through a jungle of Nehi, Grove's Chill Tonic and Dr. Pepper signs.

"Sure is a scorcher today," said Sheriff Greene. "You must want that young Jud's story real bad."

"Getting stories is my business," I said.

"It's really something, you hearing about it all the way over to Atlanta."

"Two hundred miles isn't as far as it used to be," I said.

"He tells a corking good story, no doubt about it. Guess young Jud's told it to just about everybody in the county by now. They come in on Saturday night and prime up young Jud. It's amazing what bounces off his tonsils. Better'n the television. That Jud never was what you would call bright, and here he is putting Lakeville on the map."

We drove through flat swamp and field, and past some old shacks bleached white and warped by weather. A few minutes later Sheriff Greene headed the station-wagon in through a grove of japonicas, and we stopped near the sagging front porch of the Harris place.

We got out and walked toward the porch. The two-story house had been white once with green shutters but had long ago darkened to the color of the slate-gray

yard around it. Rain-rotted shingles drooped over the eaves. Oak trees kept out the sun. Green moss stained the clapboards and columns. Chickens scratched and pecked in the yard overgrown with johnson grass and rabbit-tobacco.

As I followed Sheriff Greene up onto the porch, a wave of scorching air blew away a few more shingles that fell like cards from a worn-out deck.

Mrs. Harris, a thinly worn woman in a print dress, and a man's work shoes without socks, ran out excitedly waving a mop.

Sheriff Greene introduced us and Mrs. Harris' eyes lit up as bright as a fox.

"You really going to write Jud up in the Atlanta paper?"

"I hope to do that," I said.

"Lordamighty who'd ever thought we'd be famous!" She dropped the mop. "You just sit and be comfy here on the porch. It's burning hot inside. I'll fetch Jud."

She darted inside. I heard her yelling Jud's name all over the house, then out in back of the house while Sheriff Greene and I sat in worn wicker chairs. He fanned himself with a palmetto leaf he picked up from the porch while I got out my notebook.

Then Mrs. Harris pushed Jud out the door and stood poised behind him. "This man's from the *Atlanta Evening News,* son.. He wants to hear how you killed her.

He's going to put it in the paper!"

"Hello, Jud," I said, and stood up to shake his hand. He jumped back a step, then wiped his hands on his levis and began rubbing them together as though washing them.

Mrs. Harris laughed shrilly. "That boy's shy as a squirrel."

Young Jud shifted his shoes and stood there just about like any other shy, uncertain fifteen-year-old. He had a small round head, straw-colored hair and slightly thyroid eyes. His face looked fifteen, but the rest of him seemed older. His body was big and raw-boned.

"You want to tell me about it, Jud?" I asked.

"You really want to hear it?"

"I drove all the way out from Atlanta to hear it."

Mrs. Harris fluffed at her hair coyly. Sheriff Greene stood up, smiling and relighting his cigar. "You go on and tell him all about how you killed her, Jud."

"You tell it real good now, you hear?"

"Yeah, Ma."

"You tell it real good, son. You just sit down here beside this reporter and you tell it real good and don't you leave out a thing, you hear?"

"Sure, Ma," he said, a bit sullenly. "Don't I always?"

"You can come around back with me, Sheriff," said Mrs. Harris. "We'll leave them alone. I'll fix us all a big pitcher of lemonade. Come on, Sheriff, you heard it enough times, ain't you? He always tells it the same way."

"Guess I have at that," said Sheriff Greene and they started around the side of the house. Mrs. Harris called back. "You tell it real good now, son."

Jud sat stiffly on the edge of the wicker chair. "She gives me a pain. I always tell it good," he said.

There were these three striking things about young Jud. There was the way he seldom looked at me, but down and to the left, and occasionally glanced up as if to be sure I was still there. There was that continual rubbing his hands together as if he were washing them. The third thing was less tangible, an attitude which implied that he was perpetually waiting for something to happen.

He was perspiring heavily and kept wiping his face with his shirt sleeve.

"You can tell me anytime you feel like it," I said.

"I always tell it as best I know how. I always did, but just the same nobody believes me. Nobody at all!"

"Try me," I said.

"I tried everybody."

"It was the Thompson girl, right?"

"Yeah," he said. "Hilda May Thompson."

I looked across a row of wild tall pecan trees at another house as old as the Harris place, but smaller and weed-grown. The windows were boarded over.

"The Thompson's lived there, didn't they?" I said.

Jud nodded. "For years. But after I killed Hilda May, they moved away. No warning, no goodbye or nothing. Just up and left in the middle of the night like a lot of thieves. We were sort of friends, being neighbors like that, you know? But it wasn't the same no more. After what happened with Hilda, they wouldn't speak to us. They just took off during the night—lock, stock and barrel. Didn't even take time to sell the place, Ma says. It's lonely now. Nobody plays with me anymore."

"Tell me about the situation

when you killed Hilda May," I said.

He laughed slightly, nervously. "Well, it was—" he stopped and there was just the moving of his hands over each other.

"You and Hilda May were good friends?" I said.

"Living right next door to one another. Her family and mine, they got to know one another. They'd come over and bring Hilda May. We'd go over there sometimes. Hilda May and I'd be together a lot."

"How old was Hilda May?"

"Just about—no, a mite older'n me. She looked real grown up though. Know what I mean? Like Pa said all the time, she was stacked like a—I don't remember what it was like now. But she used to strut around and Pa used to go wild when she was gone and Ma would have fits and then he'd hit her with whatever was handy."

"What led up to the situation where you killed her?" I asked.

He cleared his throat. His eyes widened and brightened and his voice took on a deep incantational quality, as though he had indeed told the story many times before. He began to talk willingly, with a kind of satisfaction and no trace of hesitancy or shame.

"She kept after me, teasing me all the time. She just wouldn't let me be. I knew it was wrong but I couldn't get away from her. I was scared all the time knowing what

Pa would do if he knew about us. But she made me go for walks, and she was always wanting to kiss and hug. First thing I'd know we would be out behind the chicken house. You want to see where it was?"

"Just tell me about it," I said.

"Right back there through the pecan trees. That's where we'd go lots. Sometimes it was here in the house when the folks was gone. Or in her house if her folks was gone."

Jud stopped but he seemed to have an urge to go on.

"Nothing really bad ever happened, and that's the truth. I kept fighting it. I fought it something fierce. I knew what would happen. But I couldn't tell nobody how it was, and finally I just sort of gave up like it wasn't any use. That was when it happened. I was out there trying to find a bucketfull of eggs, out there in the jimsun weeds. It was hot.

"I mean it was so hot it was coming up in waves out of the dirt, like off a stove. And I'm

scrounging in the weeds trying to find eggs. I hear something and I don't have to look up to know it's Hilda. She giggles and there she is pressing right up to me."

"Go on, Jud," I said.

"There ain't a sound out there 'cepting the bees droning, and it's hot. She's right there laughing real soft, like a dove. She's wearing a thin little old cotton dress and no shoes or socks, and I know this is as far as I'm going. She falls on her knees and grabs me around the neck and we roll off through the weeds and I lose my bucket. I know it's wrong. I know what'll happen, but I don't seem to be able to do much about it.

"I want to run out of there, but I just can't. It's a kind of thing where you can't stop and you can't go back, you just got to go on. We're lying there and she's touching me and moving closer and pressing all over me. I try to tell people how it was. It's like when you're in the river swimming and a current catches you and you just got to go with it. It's like when a bird, a sparrow, gets stung by mud-daubber wasps. You ever seen that?"

"No," I said.

"Well, the wasps they sting a bird. That's so it's paralyzed and it can't fly no more, so they can eat it. They sting it and there it is still alive in its eyes and watching them but it can't move no more. That's how it was with me with Hilda and her laughing and it getting away from me . . . and first thing I know I'm kissing her and I'm hugging her. Only this is different. I'm squeezing and . . .

"Well, you probably won't believe this even if maybe you believed the rest of it. She was chasing me all that time, and now when I do what she wants, she starts screaming. I never did hear anybody scream so loud and awful. *Stop it Jud, Jud, Jud stop it.* Over and over. I tried to shut her up, but I couldn't."

"Why was it desperately important?" I asked.

"Her folks and mine right here, they'd hear."

"What would have been so bad about that?"

He glanced at me and laughed briefly. Then he looked quickly away.

"My old man. Ma wouldn't have done nothing. But he'd have killed me, I know it. He beat me with a harness strap once so hard Ma says I was out of my head for over a month. Once he broke a shovel over me. He said if I messed with Hilda he'd kill me and I knew he would. I couldn't think and then I couldn't even hear her scream. It was like I was deaf and I saw her mouth wide open, and her neck bulging but I couldn't hear anything, like when sound goes off on the television.

"All I know is I kept my hands around her throat, so she wouldn't

tell anybody. I didn't want to kill her, just make her quiet. But she wouldn't stop yelling and I grabbed her tighter around the neck, and still she wouldn't stop. So then, before I knew what I was doing, and this is the truth too, I grabbed up a board and hit her over the head with it three, four times. Didn't seem like I was even hitting her hard.

"I didn't want to hit her hard at all. I just wanted her to be quiet, and it was like I didn't swing it hard, just dropped it on her, kind of—about so far?" Jud indicated a distance of about twleve inches with his hands.

"Then she was there in the weeds all curled up and smeared with dirt and broken eggs. I crawled off a way and seen what I'd done, only then I didn't know she was dead. But she was, and it was me, me done it to her! It was me. But I heard voices coming, so I cut out fast and hard through the weeds. I stayed away until after dark. Then I climbed that tree, crawled over the porch and into my room upstairs."

Jud stopped, looking utterly exhausted.

"Is that all of the story?" I asked.

"Just about, 'cepting how I told everybody. Not right off. I waited several days before I could bring myself to tell. By then I'd found out what I'd really done to her and how important it was to the town and what they were doing about it. I felt cheated."

"Cheated?" I said.

"I'd done it. They ought to know. Everybody talking about it. I done it and nobody knew. I was cheated, wasn't I? The old man didn't scare me anymore. What could he do? So I told everybody. I kept telling it and telling it as good as I knew how, but ain't nobody believed me. Do you believe me?"

"You say it's the truth. Why shouldn't I believe you?"

"I don't know." Jud grinned. "You going to put it in a big Atlanta newspaper? Lots of people going to read about me?"

"I'll give them the story just the way you gave it to me."

"I hope they believe it," he said. "A man does something, no matter what, he ought to get the credit for it."

"He ought to," I said. "But it doesn't always happen that way."

When Sheriff Greene and Mrs. Harris came back around to the front of the house, she asked if I wanted some lemonade and I said no. Then I thanked her and Jud for their time and trouble.

"Did he tell it real good?" asked Mrs. Harris.

"No one could tell it any better," I said.

She beamed. "He ought to go on the television."

"Maybe he will," I said.

Then I gave her twenty-five

dollars and Sheriff Greene drove me back toward town.

"It was good all right," I said. "Why don't they believe him?"

"Plenty of people around here do," he said.

"He said nobody believed him."

"They do, but there ain't no one going to admit it," Greene said.

"Do you believe him?" I asked.

"Now look how it was. Everybody hears that poor girl screaming out, 'Jud, Jud, Jud.' They find her and there's nobody around but her and she won't ever tell anybody anything. Everybody figures old man Harris did it, don't they? Mrs. Harris accused him right off and everybody agreed with her. She comes in leading a parade of accusers, rousts the old man out of the back bedroom in his undershirt and screams at him for what he did to the Thompson girl."

"What did he say when she accused him?" I asked.

"First he got mad. He was looped. Almost always was loaded and high as a Georgia pine. He started to hit her with a broom, but then he turned, sudden, kind of, and he said, 'Ah, you're all a bunch of damn fools,' and he went into the bedroom and went to sleep. They swore out a warrant. I had to put him in jail. Next morning there he was hanging on that chinaberry limb."

"And it's too late," I said, "for anyone to admit they might have made a mistake."

"We all make mistakes," he said. "You'd have figured it the way they did."

"Why?"

"Her screaming 'Jud, Jud.' Now that boy was named Jude Harris Junior, but nobody ever called him Junior. Jud. And the old man's name was Jud, too. Naturally everybody figured the old man did it, it was his name she was screaming. They'd just be bound to think of him. Like I said, he was as mean a man as we ever had in this county. Mean as nitric acid."

"Do you believe he killed her?" I asked.

"If I knew what the truth was, mister," he said. "I'd be a preacher."

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Featuring

SLOT-MACHINE KELLY

THE HERO

Slot-Machine Kelly never knew he had story-telling gifts . . . until he just missed spelling out his own obituary.

by DENNIS LYNDS

THE NAME IS Patrick Kelly, and I'm writing this one myself. I knew Paul Asher and Constantine Zaretzki, and you had to know Zaretzki to tell this one right. Besides, I'm tired of having a ghost write about me. I've got enough ghosts in my life. Just ask any cop in half the cities of this damned world, not to mention a lot of sea captains and most of the bartenders.

"Very impressive," Joe said when I showed him my first paragraph.

"I think I've got the hang of this writing now," I said.

"You forgot to mention that most of the ghosts are bottles," Joe said.

Joe Harris is my best friend and roommate. He tends bar and pays the bills when I'm not working, which is most of the time. You've got to have a reason to

work, besides money, and it's been a long time since I found any reason except money. Joe understands me.

"Slot-Machine Kelly," Joe said, "the one-armed bandit. You just don't want to split the pay."

"Why split when I can get it all?" I said. "I got the hang of this writing. Besides, you got to understand Asher and Zaretzki to write about them."

Let them call me Slot-Machine, the one-armed bandit. All it means is that I've got the hang of that too, the hang of living in a world that made Asher and Zaretzki. Everybody's got something missing somewhere, one way or another, and everyone's some kind of a bandit. You've got to be a bandit to face a world that made Asher and Zaretzki and still go right on drinking your beer and propositioning waitresses.

"That was a close one," Joe said, dirtying up the bar with a rag dirtier than the bartop. "I don't want to understand Asher. I get nightmares."

Do you know that we've killed fifty million people in fifty years? Give or take a couple of million here and there. From 1914 to 1964. And I mean *killed,* not just died in hurricanes, or famines, or earthquakes, or other accidents like those we ought to be fighting instead of each other. Fifty million! Now maybe you think this is a hell of a way to start a murder story, but it isn't. In a way it's the whole story.

I want you to think about those fifty million corpses. They all figured they died for a reason, or most of them did. Now when one man dies for a cause, that seems okay, even good. It takes a good man to go out and die for a cause; I've seen them.

But what cause is worth fifty million deaths? How many causes have fifty million people to spare? You got to begin to wonder if maybe the cause doesn't go down in that ocean of blood. You got to begin to think about what fifty million corpses can do to people.

I'm not playing games. I'm not talking about *your* cause, or *my* cause, or *his* cause, or *their* cause. I'm talking about everyone, everywhere. I'm talking about people who can swallow fifty million dead bodies without even a trickle of vomit.

I'm talking about people who see those fifty million corpses, and face maybe seven hundred or eight hundred million more potential dead bodies every day, every minute, and still go right on swilling beer and making passes at the ladies.

I'm talking about Paul Asher and Constantine Zaretzki and what they had missing somewhere inside that was a lot worse than a left arm.

It was a rainy Monday afternoon when Paul Asher came to find me in Hogan's Tavern on Twenty-Sec-

ond Street near the docks. When I say Hogan's Place is near the docks, I mean near. Another fifty feet west and Hogan's patrons would have been seagulls. You can smell the river like it was flowing deep behind the seedy bar.

I like the smell of salt mud and a big river like the Hudson; the smell of oil and floating wood and debris; the sound of ships. There's something simple and honest about a river, all the rivers that flow into all the dark oceans. I was listening to the river when Asher found me.

It was a slow Monday, so I'd left a note on my office door to tell any prospective clients that they could find me at Hogan's if they wanted me that bad. I was on my third beer. Cash was low and Joe was new at Hogan's, so beer was all he could put on the cuff right then. Actually we were playing poker for the beers, but I was cold-decking Joe like always, and he knew it, so it was really getting the beer on the cuff.

I don't mind cheating Hogan. He's the kind of guy who worries so much about being cheated and made to look like a sucker that he wouldn't throw rope to a drowning kid for fear it was some kind of a trick to sucker him. That kind of guy deserves to get cheated.

Besides, Hogan thinks a one-armed man is just another cripple and can't do anything like normal people. He has no idea what you can do to a deck of cards with one good hand. It's a pleasure to cheat him.

Paul Asher was something else. You couldn't cheat Asher.

"You're Kelly?" Asher said.

He seemed to sort of come up out of the floor right beside me. He was a small man, dark, and he moved like a cat. I never saw him come into Hogan's, or walk toward me. He was just there all of a sudden. He had dark hair, grown long, and he smelled like he took a bath maybe on his birthday if it happened to be warm that day. His clothes were dark and maybe bought from some fire sale in Bulgaria. He was dark all over, colorless. Nothing reached out to tell you about him. In the twilight he would have been invisible. Only his eyes said something, told you he was, after all, alive. They were dark, and hard, and cold.

"Are you buying or selling?" I said.

"I want to hire you," Asher said.

"Then I'm Kelly," I said, "if I don't have to work too hard for my hire."

"You must deliver a package," Paul Asher said. He said it plain and flat. Humor was not part of Paul Asher.

Asher had an accent, that much I could hear. But it was an accent from nowhere. And not exactly an accent at that. It was more a kind of flat, toneless, very precise way

of speaking the English language that showed that English was not his home-town language. There was no way of telling just what language he had spoken when he was a kid, if he had ever been a kid. I couldn't place the accent, and I couldn't place Asher. He could have come from anywhere or nowhere.

"I'm a detective, kind of," I said, "not a messenger."

"I will pay five hundred dollars," Asher said.

"I'm a messenger," I said. "What's in the package, a shrunken head?"

Joe looked worried. Joe always looks worried. I've talked to Joe about that, about how when you've got nothing to lose in this world you shouldn't look worried all the time. It doesn't help. Joe likes to worry. He should have been a scoutmaster or a politician.

"That's a lot of bread for a messenger," Joe said, his eyebrows at high noon to warn me that this looked fishy. Warning me is Joe's favorite occupation. It gives him a reason to stay alive and worrying.

"The five hundred is so that you will not ask what is in the package," Asher said simply, "and because Zaretski is a dangerous person."

"Zaretzki?" I said.

"Constantine Zaretzki," Asher said. "He would kill me. I must deliver to him this package, but I would not live."

"You're afraid of him?" I said.

"And he is afraid of me," Asher said.

"I don't carry a package unless I know what's in it," I said.

"I have valuable papers to sell to Zaretzki," Asher said.

Joe's eyebrows went up another notch. "Blackmail! Slot, you better—"

"No," Asher said, "not blackmail. Simply a sale. The papers are not a danger to Zaretzki. They are merely valuable to him. I will sell them to him. If I went myself he would kill me. You will take the package?"

"Let's see it," I said.

Asher produced a small, flat package about as big as a paperback book but twice as thick. I took it. They make bombs smaller every day, but this package was too light. It had the weight and feel of papers, no more. I thought of everything lethal that could be that light, and came up with a blank. It hefted like a package of papers and nothing else. Even a deadly gas needs a container, and plastic would have had a different feel.

"Why me?" I said. "I'm not in Dun and Bradstreet."

"I have friends," Asher said. "You are a man who asks few questions, and you need money."

"You've been talking to the right people," I said. "Okay, I just take this package to Constantine Zaretzki. Does he pay me anything?"

"No," Asher said. "The package is a sample. You give it to him, no more."

"Pay now?" I asked.

Asher counted out five hundred in dirty old twenties and laid them on the bar. I took the money and the package. Asher turned to leave.

"The address?" I said.

"It is on the package," Asher said.

"How do I contact you?"

"You do not. There is no need. If I need you, I will find you," Asher said.

Asher continued on out the door and was gone. I went back to my beer—five hundred dollars richer. I left one of the fine old twenties on the bar when I shoved the rest into my pocket. They made a nice bulge. I grinned at Joe.

"Whisky for the whole house," I said grandly.

Joe looked up and down the bar. With Asher gone, there was no one in the room except Joe and me and old Hogan sitting alone at a rear table smoking a cigar and watching the cockroaches to make sure they didn't steal his whisky. Hogan doesn't drink, at least not his own watered booze.

"You're a sport," Joe said. "You going through with this?"

"I got paid," I said. "Besides, I've got a hunch Asher'll be watching me."

"You're crazy," Joe said.

Maybe Joe's right. When I got close to the address on the package, I began to wonder about just how crazy I was. After my whisky at Hogan's, I grabbed a taxi to the uptown East Side address where I was supposed to deliver the package to Constantine Zaretzki. It was way over by the East River, and the street was dark. Dark but not deserted. There was no one on the street, but I could feel eyes.

I knew that Asher would be somewhere around watching me to make sure I delivered. But I felt other eyes. When you grow up near the docks, and you start stealing early because you have to eat

even when your mother is a lush and your father took a bunk to parts unknown long before, you learn to feel eyes.

When you sail ships through a war zone, you learn to feel eyes on you from under water. When you get paid to spy and snoop around the back streets of most of the cities of the world, you can feel eyes watching from a thousand yards.

I felt eyes watching.

I walked slowly down that dark street. I can spot shadows of shadows, and I knew I was not alone. I had the feeling that no one walked down that street alone. It was in the air, a sort of alert, watching silence all around me. Then I began to see them.

At the far end of the dark street two men leaned against a building in the shadows. Behind me at the corner I had come from, two more men lurked. At a window directly across from the address of Constantine Zaretzki, there was a head, watching.

I went up the flight of steps to the door of the brownstone. I had my finger on the bell when I heard a footstep behind me. I turned. A short, powerful man stood four steps below me. He had a very nasty looking automatic in his left hand. He just stood there, another man behind him at the foot of the steps. I turned again to face the door. Too late. Hands reached out, and an arm went around my throat. The arm clamped tight, and I was dragged into the darkness of the entrance hall.

YOU CAN'T TIE a one-armed man's hands behind his back. It creates a problem. They had solved it neatly. I was tied expertly to the chair around the chest. It wasn't comfortable, but that did not seem to bother them. I counted six different men who came and went in the small room, but they barely looked at me. They were busy.

The short, powerful man seemed to be the leader. He barked out orders like a drill sergeant, sending the other men in and out of the room. They were speaking a language I didn't understand, but I didn't have to understand them to know what they were doing.

They were searching the street, the house, the backyards, the roofs, everywhere close by for anyone who might have come with me. They were quick, sure, and silent. Only the stocky leader barked his orders, the others hurrying in and out in silence, answering only in nods and short grunts. They were all armed, and they knew their business.

It was another half an hour before they got around to me. The stocky leader slapped my mouth, hard.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" he demanded.

The others stood covering all of the doors and windows. The win-

dows were heavily curtained, and I had the feeling that they were boarded up behind the curtains.

"I wondered when you'd get around to that," I said. "I could have saved you all the motions. I came alone."

"Why?"

"To deliver that package over there," I said.

The package was on a small side table, unopened. The stocky man looked at it.

"Deliver it to who, Mr. Kelly?" he asked, "if that is your name."

"Someone named Zaretzki," I said. Constantine Zaretzki. Is that you?"

The stocky man ignored my question. "From who did the package come?" he said.

"Paul Asher," I said. "He said it was something Zaretzki would buy."

"Asher?" the stocky man said. "I know no Asher. You are lying, Mr. Kelly. Your papers say you are a private detective. They hired you. Do not try to lie! You came here armed, to kill Zaretzki!"

"I don't even know Zaretzki," I said. "I mean, I don't know who he is, or why anyone would want to kill him. If you have reason to believe someone's trying to kill, why not go to the police?"

While I talked I had been watching their faces. These men did not look like gangsters. They were all grim and unsmiling. Then, as I watched, their expressions changed and I was aware that someone else had entered the room.

Whoever it was had come into the small room through a door behind me. I could feel him standing there. His voice was low but hard, and he spoke perfect English.

"The police could not save me, Mr. Kelly," the new voice said. "The police would be of no help."

There was an air of command in the voice, of absolute confidence. The stocky man had come so rigidly to attention that I had little doubt that the newcomer was Constantine Zaretzki.

"I guess not," I said, "not if you were out to kill Asher. Maybe you're telling it backwards. Maybe it's Asher who should be afraid of you and your private army here."

"You miserable—" the stocky man began to say.

"Be silent, Emil!" the voice behind me said. I agreed with him. Emil was a lot more pleasant silent.

But Emil wasn't buying the silence bit. The stocky man was as suspicious as a Chinese Communist looking at a present from the Russians.

"He is another one! I can smell them," Emil cried. "I say kill him —now!"

"Perhaps," the voice of Zaretzki said behind me. "But let us find out if he *is* another one."

Emil swore in the unknown language. "What does it matter? We

cannot take the chance. You must be safe at any cost."

I waited for Zaretzki's answer to that one, but the man behind me said nothing. I had a few answers myself, and was about to offer them free of charge, when a chair scraped against the floor and I could feel a hot breath close to my neck.

Zaretzki had sat down close behind me. That was okay. I liked the breath on my neck. As long as I could feel the breath, I was ahead of the game.

Zaretzki's voice, when he began to speak again, was cold and efficient.

"A man hired you to deliver a package to me at this address," he said. "Is that correct?"

"Correct," I said.

"What was his reason for using you?"

"He was afraid of you," I said.

"He gave you to believe I would kill him?"

"In spades," I said.

It was kind of weird, unreal, to be talking straight ahead into empty air. I had more than an urge to try to turn around and talk to Zaretzki straight, but I resisted the urge. I had a hunch that would be a bad play. The boys in the room looked jumpy enough already. A false move would have pretty certainly started a shooting gallery. It was in the air.

"And his name was Paul Asher?" Zaretzki said behind me.

"Check," I said.

"I do not know anyone named Asher, but that does not surprise me. Can you describe this Asher?"

I described Paul Asher down to the stain on the small man's tie. I had been played for some kind of sucker, as usual. The trouble was I didn't know yet just *what* kind.

"I do not recognize the description," Zaretzki said behind me, "but that does not surprise me either, Mr. Kelly. However, I think you have saved your life."

Emil almost hopped up and down, he was so mad. The stocky man with the big gun in his fist obviously did not like my being reprieved by his boss. If Emil had his way I would have been feeling nothing but dirt in my face in some empty lot.

"We cannot take the risk!" Emil cried.

"No, Emil," Zaretzki said calmly behind me. "If Mr. Kelly were anything more than he says he is he would not have described this Asher. He could be lieing, but I think not. He has acted exactly as he should have acted. You found no one else with him. He clearly does not know what was in the package or he would have told a better story."

The last point seemed to make Emil think. It made me wonder. What had been in the package that would have made me tell a better story if I had known? At the moment I didn't waste much more

time thinking about it. I was too busy wondering about Paul Asher and his angle, whatever it was. Zaretzki seemed to be reading my mind.

"One thing puzzles me, and I cannot afford to be puzzled," Zaretzki said. "There was some reason for sending you to me, but I cannot understand what it is. I must know why you were sent. Tell me your story once more, Mr. Kelly."

I told him. I gave him chapter and verse. When I have nothing to tell, I always tell the truth. I knew I had nothing to tell Zaretzki. I had no idea why Paul Asher had hired me. It was possible that it was Zaretzki and not Asher who was working the con job on me. Zaretzki had dismissed the package as of no importance, but I noticed that it was gone from the side table.

Maybe the package was just what Asher said it was—valuable papers. Maybe Zaretzki was conning me into leading him back to Asher and the rest of the papers. It wouldn't help him. I couldn't have led him to Asher if my life depended on it. Asher wasn't dumb.

"I cannot understand it," Zaretzki said when I had finished the second show of my yarn. "But at least you have done me one service, Mr. Kelly. If you are not lieing, I now know what this Asher looks like. I will be ready for whatever he plans. If you are lieing, it does not matter, I will be ready now."

"Ready?" I said. I didn't need a blueprint to figure out what Zaretzki had in mind if he ever ran into Paul Asher on a dark night. But I wanted to hear it.

"I will kill him, Mr. Kelly," Zaretzki said simply. "It would be necessary."

"You boys play rough," I said.

"We are not boys, and we do not play," Emil said.

"That's too bad," I said.

There was movement again behind me. The chair scraped and the hot breath on my neck went away. All the hard-looking boys stood at attention again.

"Take your five hundred, Mr. Kelly, and forget you ever heard of me or Paul Asher," Zaretzki said.

Then I could tell that Zaretzki had gone away. A door closed behind me.

Emil untied me. The stocky man's heart wasn't in it, but his

boss had spoken. While I got the circulation back in my arm, I took a chance to have a quick look around. The door behind me was closed.

I saw the package I had carried. It was lying on a table behind where I had been sitting, the brown paper torn open, and exposing a thick stack of what looked like folded papers. The package looked innocent enough. Just papers, like Asher had said, and he could have been telling the truth.

They didn't give me a chance to see more. There was something damned odd about that package, but I was too busy wondering if I was going to make it out alive to give it much thought.

The boys hustled me from the room and out into a long hall. We went down another hall and came to the door I recognized. The next thing I knew I was back out on the steps and walking down to the dark street. It was still deserted, and I could still feel the eyes watching me.

I didn't look back. I was out, I planned to stay out. I had no interest in Zaretzki and Asher and their private feud, whatever it was. I walked down that street as fast as I could without running. To run would have made me look like a coward.

I didn't run until I got around the corner. I made the next block faster. In fact I was on Third Avenue before I decided to be brave and stop running. I took the subway on Lexington.

By the time I got home to my apartment on Twenty-Seventh Street, I had forgotten all about Zaretzki and Asher. I worked on forgetting. There was too much I didn't know about those two boys. When I don't know something, I find out or forget it fast. It's safer that way.

Joe wasn't home yet, so I had a fast whisky and felt better. I was five hundred dollars richer and still alive. I figured I was home free. I should have known better. My arm, the one I don't have, had begun to ache. That's always a sign. When the missing wing starts to hurt where there isn't any arm to feel pain, I've got trouble coming.

I LOST THAT arm when I fell into the hold of a Dutchman ship on a small stealing expedition when I was just a kid. I got the loot out a porthole, so all they got me for was trespassing, but I lost the arm. I usually tell people I lost it in the war. It makes them feel better to think I'm a wounded hero. It makes me feel better too, the war stories I tell.

After all, I did lose the wing in a war—a war to stay alive and eating in those days, a war against playing it the way someone had dealt me the cards. I'm still fighting that way. I won't play the game they say I've got to play. I won't

buy their stupid game of success, money, and power. But that's another story.

This is the story of Asher and Zaretzki, and I should have known it wasn't over when the missing arm started to ache. Not the stump, the arm itself. You got to be a cripple to know what I mean. It's always the missing piece of you that aches most, that hurts when the days are bad. But maybe you do know. We're all cripples one way or another.

It was still dark, but getting light in the east, when they began pounding a tom-tom on my door. Joe was asleep in the next bed. Joe can sleep through almost anything. I took a look at the grey dawn outside the window of the bedroom, and I lay there listening to them pound on the door. It was a cop type of pounding, and it was barely dawn. I had trouble.

Captain Gazzo himself led the boys in blue into my living room when I opened the door.

"Paul Asher," Gazzo said.

"A nice name," I said. "You got more?"

"We don't need more," Sergeant Jonas said. "One name like that don't need no more."

Sergeant Jonas doesn't like me. Captain Gazzo isn't exactly a buddy, either. It was Gazzo who gave me the name, Slot-Machine Kelly the one-armed bandit, but the Captain doesn't hate me. Jonas hates me. With Jonas his job is important. He's protecting The Game, the way it's played, the right and good and proper, and I don't play so he's got to crush me if he can. So he hates me, and right now in the grey light Jonas was happy.

"Shut up, Jonas," Captain Gazzo snapped. "Was Asher a client of yours, Slot?"

"You know I can't tell—" I began with righteous and legal indignation. I stopped. "Was? You said 'was?'."

"Stiff as all your clients, Kelly," Jonas said.

"Asher's dead?" I said.

Gazzo nodded. "We found him about an hour ago dumped under the George Washington Bridge. Shot up like swiss cheese. Don't ask what weapon, the killers used them all on him. You got any ideas?"

I had one idea. The George Washington Bridge is a long way from Zaretzki's stronghold and on the other side of the city. That was it. If I'd knocked off Asher on the East Side, I'd have dumped him on the upper West Side, too. I'd have dumped him in Jersey, but I'm very careful.

"Constantine Zaretzki," I said, "and a playful boy named Emil, and a half a dozen other retainers."

"Give us the story," Gazzo said.

I gave. I knew it as well as a good dealer knows his favorite poker deck by now. Chapter and

verse again. Gazzo listened. Jonas listened as if he couldn't believe anyone could have been dumb enough to swallow Asher's yarn in the first place, not even me. Maybe he was right. Gazzo didn't care about me.

"Asher said Zaretzki was out to kill him," the Captain said, "Zaretzki said he would kill Asher, and you think Zaretzki was afraid of Asher. Okay, let's pick him up."

But I had a question. It puzzled me. On the way up in Gazzo's unmarked Homicide car, with a platoon of squad cars behind us, I asked my question.

"How'd you know I was working for Asher?" I asked.

"Your cards," Gazzo said without looking at me. The Captain was barking orders into his radio-phone. Gazzo's a good cop; he still gets excited about a murder.

"Cards?" I said.

"What do you do, Kelly?" Jonas said. "Give them out by the dozen? Asher must have had ten in his pockets."

"He also had a little notebook with your name and office address in it, and a notation of five hundred dollars paid," Gazzo said.

"He should get his money back," Jonas said.

I was thinking. I hadn't given Asher my card, not even one. Business cards cost money. As far as I knew Asher had never been in my office. He had met me in Hogan's, and, besides, I keep the cards locked up. I do give the cards out to uptown contacts in case anyone wants a kidnapped poodle found. Asher must have gotten the cards from whoever sent him to me. Before he ever met me or hired me.

By this time we had reached my favorite dark street on the East Side. It wasn't dark now, just grey in the dawn, but it was as deserted as ever. And I knew the eyes were still watching. The squad cars came from both ends of the street like a stampede of buffalo to a water hole. Only in this case the water hole was the brownstone house where I had delivered the package last night.

The squad cars nosed in toward the silent house like thirsty horses. The police aren't exactly quiet about their work. As Gazzo and Jonas got out of the Homicide car to lead their troops, windows began to pop open all up and down the block. Nothing popped open in the brownstone where Constantine Zaretzki lived with his private little army.

The brownstone was as dark and silent as a medieval fortress. It turned out to be almost as hard to crack into.

As they say in the communiques, Gazzo's men encountered determined resistance. Knocks, shouts, and threats did not open the door. The windows remained closed. Gazzo ordered his men to break down the door. It was a strong

door, but they finally did the job. The door went down. Gazzo stepped into the hallway inside.

Instantly, windows opened in the house and guns protruded aimed down into the street at the police. In the hallway Gazzo stood frozen and facing the stocky man named Emil. Emil had his gun in his hand. Behind Emil a voice spoke. The speaker, Constantine Zaretzki, was hidden somewhere in the gloom of the hall. I could not see him from where I stood in the shelter of the stairs, but I knew that voice by now.

"You are the police?"

"Call your men off, Zaretzki. We only want to talk to you," Gazzo said.

"How do I know you are the police?" the voice said.

Gazzo looked around at the blue uniforms that filled the hallway and the sidewalk in front of the building.

"You mean you think we're *all* fake police?" Gazzo said. I could hear a roar of anger growing in the Captain's throat. Gazzo does not like to be kidded by anyone. This did not bother Zaretzki.

"I have seen them try bigger tricks," the voice of Zaretzki said. "Tell me your name, number, and I will call to check."

"Now you tell you're damned men to—" Gazzo roared.

"I do not want trouble, I will check on you."

Gazzo clamped his mouth shut. He was so surprised that I heard him give his name and shield number. That was not like Gazzo, but, then, this was not like any homicide case I had ever been on. It did not take Zaretzki long.

I could imagine the scene at Police Headquarters when they received the call asking about a Captain Gazzo and would they please describe Gazzo! They must have given a good description. This time Constantine Zaretzki stepped out and I saw him for the first time.

"All right, Captain, won't you step in?" Zaretzki said.

The guns vanished from the windows. Emil followed his chief into the same small room where they had held me. I was watching Zaretzki. The man was small and thick, as wide as he was tall. He had powerful shoulders and a bullet head. The head shined in the light of the boarded-up room like a billiard ball. Zaretzki's head was shaved and was set like a thick egg on a bull neck.

In the small room, with his men around him, Zaretzki waved Gazzo to a seat. The Captain remained standing. I stayed out in the hall where I could watch and listen, but where Zaretzki could not get a glimpse of me.

"Just who are you, Mr. Zaretzki? Why do you have armed men guarding you?" Gazzo said to the bullet-headed Zaretzki. Gazzo spoke quietly enough, but I could hear the edge of menace in the

Captain's voice. Gazzo does not like private armies in his city.

"A poor exile, Captain Gazzo," Zaretzki said softly. "And these are merely some loyal friends. They have permits for their weapons."

"An exile from where?" Gazzo said.

"Albania, Captain. We are simple Albanians," Zaretzki said.

Then I understood. Albania. That was the language I did not recognize, Albanian.

"Was Paul Asher an Albanian, too," Gazzo snapped. "Is that why you were afraid of him? Is that why you killed him!"

Zaretzki stared at Gazzo. The bullet-headed Albanian seemed puzzled. Then his thick face broke into a smile.

"He is dead? Good! I am glad! He is one we will not have to kill. You bring me good news, Captain, but how—?" Zaretzki stopped. The bullet head nodded suddenly. "Of course, you have talked with that Mr. Kelly! I should have guessed. Are you here again, Mr. Kelly?"

I stepped into the room. I flashed my bravest smile toward the glowering Emil and the bullet-headed Zaretzki. And I missed it. I almost missed the whole, murderous, impossible thing.

SOMETIMES I wonder if there is anyone left who has not killed. I know there are many, but sometimes it doesn't seem like there can be anyone who hasn't. I've killed, not in the army the way I like to tell it for free beers in the bars, but I've worked for the Government, and I've worked for myself, and in my work you kill sooner or later. Maybe that was why I missed the clue in what Zaretzki had said.

I remember a time when we used to say that a really inhuman, animal type of man killed for the fun of it. Today they kill without even having any fun out of it. They just kill. It is their job, their duty, their work, their assigned role. They kill the way another man reports the dog show. It is those fifty million rotted corpses swallowed without need even of an aspirin.

In that small room I grinned at Zaretzki.

"Maybe you shouldn't have let me go," I said.

Emil growled like a frustrated lion. Zaretzki started to answer. Gazzo waved us all to silence.

"You're saying you didn't kill this Paul Asher?" Gazzo said.

"We did not," Zaretzki said.

"But you would have?" Gazzo said.

"Yes, Captain."

"Because he was out to kill you?" Gazzo asked.

"Yes," Zaretzki said.

"Why didn't you come to us for protection?"

Zaretzki smiled. "The police? No, Captain. You see, I am not precisely a friend of your Government. Let me tell you what I am. I am a Communist, an Albanian Communist. I have no love for your weak and stupid capitalist regime. They have no love for me. In my country I had, shall we say, an argument with the present leaders. They wish me dead. They must have me dead. Someday I will go back and they will run if I am not dead.

"Six times in six countries they have tried to kill me. In four of those countries, before I knew it would not help, I had police protection. It did not help, it did not stop them. I was many times almost killed, I have killed five of them. But they do not give up. They will never give up. If I were them, I would not give up. Someday I will kill all of them!"

It was right then that I first began to think about the fifty million corpses in fifty years. Zaretzki said the word *kill* the way most men say *work*—a fact of life, a necessity, sometimes good and sometimes bad, a tool of living. And I don't mean that it had anything to do with being a Communist. It is not only the Communists who have swallowed those fifty million dead men like so many faceless jelly beans.

"In the meantime you protect yourself," Gazzo said. "Like not even trusting the police."

"I trust no one, Captain. It is why I am alive. But I do not kill for nothing, even my enemies know that. No one can reach me without great danger, Captain, but I do not kill unless I know my enemy."

"You knew Asher," Gazzo said. "Kelly described him."

"Yes, but he never came here," Zaretzki said.

Gazzo stood up. "Okay, I think you all better come to Headquarters. Maybe you didn't kill Asher, but I need a lot more proof."

"Very well, Captain. And my friends?"

"Them, too," Gazzo said. And Gazzo instructed his men. "Take their guns, search this house from top to bottom."

I watched as Gazzo's men herded Zaretzki and the others out of the small room. Other police had already begun to search. In the small room I felt sick when I thought about Constantine Zaretzki. The bullet-headed Albanian would kill every enemy, or friend, who even bothered him. In cold

blood, without hate or remorse. He drew the line at killing without *some* reason, and he was very proud of that. He considered that it made him a moral man. I didn't knock it; that was what had kept me alive, but it was not exactly high morality.

I looked down the hall from the doorway. I could still see the bullet-head of Zaretzki surrounded by police. Emil seemed to be giving the cops some trouble. He was probably reluctant to give up his gun. Cold-blooded killers, all of them, and yet I was sure they had *not* killed Asher.

They were not the type to wait around if they had. They must have known that I would tell the police about them and Asher. If they had killed him they would have been long gone before the police could connect me to Asher, and I could connect Zaretzki to Asher.

It was then that I got it.

Right then. I was there in the doorway to the small room, ready to walk down the hall and out, and I got it. *I was the only one who could connect Asher and Zaretzki.* The bullet-headed Albanian had said that himself, he had known it had to be me who brought the cops. Asher, dead, had sent Gazzo to me with my cards in his pockets, and I had brought Gazzo to Zaretzki. I got it, but I didn't want it. I felt colder than I had ever been in my life.

I walked back into the small room. Ran, not walked. The package was still there where I had seen it lying open. I looked at it. What I had remembered was right. I knew what was wrong with the package. The folded sheets of paper were all blank. A two-inch thick sheaf of blank paper, that was what had been in the package I had carried.

Now I knew why Zaretzki had told Emil that if I had known what was in the package I would have told a better story. I would not have said that I had been sent with valuable documents! When you knew what actually was in the package, it was a stupid story. And Asher had known that. Asher had known that Zaretzki would work me over.

Asher had sent me to Zaretzki with a phony package of blank paper. Nothing more.

All this had taken only seconds. Before I had finished that last thought, I was out of the room and half way down the hall toward the front door—running. I went out that front door like Peter Snell finishing the 800 meters. Gazzo and Zaretzki had just reached the foot of the stairs down to the street. The Homicide car waited with Jonas holding the door open.

I had my revolver out and cocked.

I saw him standing not two feet from Jonas, just where Gazzo and Zaretzki would have to pass.

He was a tall, thin man. I had never seen him before in my life. But I knew him. The police uniform was a good fit, but it was not his uniform. The revolver already in his hand was long and deadly and not a police pistol. He stepped one step out toward Zaretzki just as I got half way down the steps.

I had no time to aim. There wasn't even time to think. Gazzo and Zaretzki had seen the man. Emil had seen the phony cop. Jonas had seen the leveled pistol. None of them could have made a move in time.

I fired three shots.

I never did find out where the first shot went. Into a wall across that street, I guess.

The second shot caught Jonas in the leg. The sergeant still thinks I aimed at him.

The third shot got the phony cop in the arm. It wasn't much; it barely needed a bandage later. But it was enough. It made that assassin jerk to his right, and his first shot missed Zaretzki by an inch.

That phony cop never got off a second shot. Gazzo, Emil, and five husky *real* cops swarmed him under like an avalanche there on the East Side street.

LIKE I SAID at the start, everyone's got something missing somewhere. You've got to be at least a bandit to stand up and face a world that could have made Paul Asher.

The cops never got anything important out of that phony cop who had been waiting there on the street to kill Constantine Zaretzki. I had saved Zaretzki, but that didn't make me feel good. They were a pair, Asher and Zaretzki, but even Zaretzki had not imagined just how much Asher had missing inside.

I don't know Asher's real name, or who he was, or where he came from. No one knows, and no one ever will. A corpse in a Potters Field grave on Harts Island, under a marker with a false name on it. No one will ever visit that grave. Paul Asher died faceless, nameless, and unknown even to his partner the phony cop.

The phony cop who had shot at Zaretzki never gave his real name, no one came forward to visit him. But he did not mind telling his story now that it was over. The plan had been Paul Asher's. The job had been to kill Constantine Zaretzki. They had almost succeeded. Zaretzki himself had not guessed why I had been hired to deliver that package. It was too cold even for Zaretzki.

"Himself?" Joe said, his hand hanging paralyzed above the bar. "Asher killed himself just to send the cops to pick up Zaretzki?"

"To smoke him out into the open where his partner could get a clear shot," I said.

It was late evening now, it wasn't raining, but here in Hogan's Tavern I watched the door any-

way. I sort of expected that the river would flow right up over its banks and drown us all right now. Old Hogan was still sitting in the back watching to make sure I didn't get his cheap whisky free. I almost felt I liked Hogan. Greed is a human thing, at least—often a little apart from killing.

"They couldn't get to Zaretzki, a lot of others had tried," I said. I drained my whisky and pushed the glass toward Joe. "It was Asher's own plan. The phony cop told us all about it, he was *proud* of Asher and himself. Asher hired me just to have a private cop know that Zaretzki wanted Asher dead. Then he put my business cards in his pocket so the cops would come to me and ask questions. Then he killed himself. His partner, the phony cop, shot up the body afterwards to make it look like he'd been killed by a gang."

"And you took the cops to Zaretzki," Joe said. "The other killer, the phony cop, was waiting. It almost worked."

"Yeh," I said, "it almost worked. You know, Joe, every assassin expects to die if he succeeds in his job, maybe even if he fails in the attempt, but Asher died without any chance of knowing if the plan would work or not. He had no way of knowing I would tell the cops about Zaretzki, or that they would listen to me. A million things could have gone wrong. He killed himself just on the chance the plan would work and Zaretzki would be killed."

"The guy wasn't human," Joe said.

"No," I said. "Asher was human. That's the real horror."

And it is the real horror. I had five hundred dollars, and the rest of that night I drank whisky as fast as Joe could pour, but half a grand didn't buy enough whisky. Paul Asher, or whatever his real name was, was a human being. He had a cause and a job to do. But even a rat fights to survive, kills to stay alive. Paul Asher died just to kill. He killed himself the way you and I would step on a cockroach. Just a tool in a plan, his own plan.

And somewhere there are probably people who think Asher was a hero. Fifty million corpses in fifty years, maybe eight hundred million corpses tomorrow or the next day, and we go right on drinking our beer and whisky.

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

The Way Out

A victim of prejudice in a small mining town can be doubly handicapped . . . if he happens to be a school teacher with law-defying pupils.

by FRANK CRISMON

KIRBY STEEN braked the yellow pick-up, and turned toward the man at his side. "Do you see that patch of rocks—next to the mesquite up the mountain? That's where he is."

Dan Ponce focused the binoculars for a moment, then pulled them down from the bright noon day glare to the tree. "Nothing moving, as far as I can see. His tone indicated exasperated disbelief and reflected as well his angry reluctance at being here.

"He's there. If you don't believe me, slip out where he can see you.

He's gone plain crazy with the rifle."

Dan held the glasses a moment longer. Then he lowered them. Could things be worse, he wondered. Why did a kid like Fred Cole shoot a man? Wild he was, sure. But why a shooting? Why did he, Dan Ponce, have to be here at all—a flop of an English teacher from Gummery High? God knows, he wasn't heroic.

It was bad enough to feel you had blood on your Mexican hands, but to have to witness or—more accurately—to participate in madness, with an intrusion into the tortured scene of Fred Cole's sister Diane strained beyond reason a man's capacity to carry on.

Kirby parked the pick-up beside the patrol cars and the other vehicles from town. Sheriff Cass nodded to Dan Ponce as he approached.

"Sorry to take you away from your classes, Dan," the sheriff said. "You know Diane Cole, don't you?"

Dan nodded and tried to say "hello" as though the girl's hysterical accusations over the telephone the night before had been completely erased from his mind. Through the strain on her somber face he could see today's even harsher recriminations, scarcely hidden: *Do you see where he is now? What's happened?*

"If you'll excuse me," she said in a voice hoarse with reproach, "I think I'll sit in the car. The sun is hot."

Sheriff Cass walked her to one of the shaded vehicles. A beautiful girl. Tall, dark-haired, tanned. But she couldn't, hard as she tried, be father, mother, and sister to Fred Cole. Hell, who could? Fred had never been helpful.

"Brave girl," said Sheriff Cass when he returned, flipping half an inch of ash from his cigarette. "She was out here most of last night."

"You thought I might help?" Dan asked. He was tempted to add: "I suggest you get to the point, sheriff. I'm not here to discuss the virutes of Diane Cole, lovely as she is.

"We hoped you might give us a hand," the sheriff said.

"What do you want me to do? Tell him I'm sorry?"

"Well, I won't tell you what to do," Cass said. "But since there is some antagonism—"

"Antagonism! Why don't you call it what it is—unreasoning hate. And it's not my fault. Did I or anyone else ask Diane Cole to stay in this town? Anyway, I don't know what I can do."

"You surprise me, Dan. You've proved already that you can do quite a bit. It took more than nerve or cockiness to come back to your home town and teach. And folks have accepted you—the first Mexican teacher this school's ever had."

"You forget two who haven't—the Cole kids."

"I admit they're a little different."

"Look, sheriff, Fred Cole has been fighting me the whole year. I don't know if he's encouraged by his sister or not. But I couldn't take it anymore. I'm the one, I admit, who sent him banging off to greener fields by kicking him out of class.

"I guess, in a sense, I lost. I know what will happen now. Because I'm a Mexican everyone will agree I should have gone somewhere else to teach. Yeah, I lost all right. People will say I built him a cell, nice and airtight, with no way out."

"This might give you a chance to get back a share of the victory."

A window in the cell to breathe through? "Exactly what am I supposed to do?"

"Talk to him. If I remember correctly, you yourself were in some pretty tight spots around here as a kid."

Dan smiled bitterly. "I'm not denying that. But I never shot anyone." He looked up the mountainside, blinking against the glare. "So I talk to him. He never listened in class. But I'll talk to him. I'll tell him I was wrong. Is that what you want?"

"Dan—"

"All right. I'll try."

"We sent Kirby into town for more speaking equipment," the sheriff said. "Young Cole hit ours this morning with the rifle." He swung about. "Where is Kirby Steen?" he called. No one seemed to know. "Damn that boy. He's here and gone so many times I can't keep up with him," the sheriff complained. "Let me see if he unloaded the equipment before he left."

Dan gazed up the mountain again. Fred Cole . . . A devil in class. A Mexican hater. But was he the kind to shoot a man? Apparently his sister didn't think so. Dan looked across at her car, and decided that talking to her could do no harm. What more could he lose? The walls of the cell were over his head already.

Diane Cole saw him coming and turned away.

"Sheriff Cass says you've been here all night," Dan said in a conciliatory tone.

She didn't answer.

"I'm going to talk to Fred. But I don't know if it will do any good."

"I don't either."

"Do you think I should even try? Is that it?"

"Mr. Ponce—" she turned to him finally—"I will try anything."

"Even me."

"You said that—not I."

"But the implication was there," Dan said, unable to keep a trace of bitterness out of his voice.

"Look, if we get your brother

down from that mountain, I suggest you go away from here—quite far away. The two of you have lived on a diet of bitterness and hate for so long—"

"Are you trying to tell me it's my fault Fred's up there?"

"I'm saying the two of you are hurting yourselves by hating. Especially your brother. If he's wounded he can't stay up there another night. How he's lasted this long with the hot sun blazing down on him I don't know. The temperature must be well over a hundred."

"Do you suppose I haven't thought of that?"

Dan remained grimly silent for a moment. Finally he said, "I'll do what I can."

When he returned to where the sheriff was standing he found the speaker nearly ready, facing the hillside. At their backs there trickled a creek of cold water, and beyond that the road. Another mountain loomed further on, red-rocked, closing the canyon.

"Bad place, isn't it?" the sheriff said. "Hardly a more unapproachable spot in the state. The mountainside is honey-combed with mine shafts they used before the town was moved over the hill back in nineteen-twelve."

"The supports in the tunnels must have rotted since then," Dan said, frowning.

"The whole mountain has," Sheriff Cass replied. "Just how extensively we don't know."

The speaking equipment was crude, brought from one of the club buildings in Gummery and hastily readied. As the generator started the spectators clustered as near as they were permitted to do.

Dan took the mike. He blew at it, and spoke a few words. The machine made a crackling sound before his voice boomed out against the mountainside.

"THIS IS DAN PONCE, FRED. DO YOU HEAR ME?"

The mountain blazed under the sun.

"I WANT TO TALK TO YOU. I'M COMING OUT WHERE YOU CAN SEE ME."

Sheriff Cass grabbed Dan's arm, but the young school teacher pulled away, jerking the cord with

him. No one would ever say he hadn't tried.

In the quiet, Dan's slowly advancing footsteps mushroomed in volume. Diane watched from the car, her hands tight on the wheel, as he moved out away from the other cars into the dazzling sunlight toward the creek curving in on the mountain.

"THE MAN YOU SHOT WON'T DIE, FRED."

Dan stepped a few feet beyond the creek. Such ungodly silence—the water trickling behind him, his own breathing quickening. He stared at the mesquite until his eyes burned, trying to see, to imagine some response.

"FRED—"

The sudden shot blasted at his feet. Dan threw himself to the ground, the echo reverberating between the hills as he scrambled, falling, sliding backwards into the creek. The thin stream chilled him, though it was deep enough to wet only the front of him as he lay in it.

"Stay down, Dan!" Sheriff Cass yelled. "Crawl forward, but don't get to your feet!"

Dan clambered below the protection of the narrow bank until he reached the pile of rocks where Sheriff Cass and a deputy waited.

"Damn fool kid!" exclaimed the sheriff.

Dan was shaking. Though the weather was hot, the sheriff wrapped a blanket from one of the cars around him, and handed him a cigarette.

"I'm okay," he said.

Diane had gotten out of her car. She stared first at him, then at the mountain.

"I—I'm sorry—" she started to say.

When he nodded and patted her gently on the shoulder she began to cry. She leaned against the car and he watched helplessly until her weeping died.

"Let me drive you back to town," he said at last.

She did not protest.

DAN DIDN'T want to simply leave her in her little house five miles from the village. Who knew what the sight of the steeply ascending road winding through the canyon to the mountain top might do to her?

He drove past the high school, closed now, and into town. Like many western mining towns Gummery was scattered over the mountain slopes like an upset deck of cards. Diane caught a few surprised glances when she entered the Longfellow Inn with him, but they were sympathetically ignored after they found a booth. While they waited for their order, Kirby Steen entered.

"Man, Mr. Ponce," he said. "You almost got it, didn't you?"

"It was not as bad as it looked," Dan said, irritated by the handsome face of the ex-high school student.

Kirby was altogether too self-possessed, and impertinently curious.

Dan said wryly, "But you weren't up there. What makes you such an authority?"

"Everybody knows what goes on up there, Mr. Ponce."

"You seem to have made yourself a special courier, Kirby."

"I been helping Sheriff Cass," Kirby said.

Diane smiled,—briefly, bitterly, and for the first time. "He always knows what's going on, Dan. It's been one of the differences between Kirby and Fred ever since they've been friends. If Fred isn't in some kind of—" she hesitated —"mischief, he's walled up in a daydream."

"Maybe that's what he's doing up on that mountain—daydreaming. He sure don't want to come down."

"No, Kirby," said Diane. "But Mr. Ponce tried."

"He almost shot that mike plain out of Mr. Ponce's hand," Kirby said. "He's gone plain crazy."

Luckily their orders came then and Kirby left. With such harebrained friends it was no wonder Fred got into trouble, Dan Ponce thought.

They ate slowly, silently, until Diane set her fork down, her meal half-eaten. "How can he stay out there another night? If he's been shot—"

"He must be scared," Dan said.

"No one saw Fred shoot that man."

"But his car was seen leaving the station," Dan reminded her. "There was blood by the gas pumps. And they found his car out by the mountain, and Fred's footprints on the soft earth near the gas pump. Who else could have done it? Face it, Miss Cole. Fred's been heading toward this for a long while."

"I know, I know," Diane said, shaking her head.

"Come on, let's leave," Dan. said, picking up the check. "I'll take you home."

He bought cigarettes, and they passed out into the sunlight again. Diane was silent as he started the car. Then she said, "Don't take me home. I want to go back out there."

"Miss Cole—"

"You know I won't rest." And when he still hesitated—"Mr. Ponce, he's my *brother*."

"All right," he said. "Why don't you shower first. It will help you relax. Then I'll come by."

He drove her up the hill to her house. How much more of this she could bear he didn't know. He wished he could say he didn't care, but now that her hostility had turned to friendliness and trust he no longer could. Since her parents had died seven years ago in the automobile accident, Diane had made worry a close partner—slugging a typewriter in the Gen-

eral Office as soon as she'd graduated from high school while Fred ran loose over the town like a wild colt, unbridled, and kicking at the cockleburrs of order and restraint.

As she got out of the car, her gaze lingered for a moment on the mountain hidden by the tall canyon walls. The road was a dusty ribbon at the bottom.

"Thirty minutes," Dan said. Then she went inside and he returned to his room in town.

He lay on the bed smoking a cigarette and surveying the walls of his cell, high bleak walls rising up and up. That automobile accident . . .

Things might have been different if the people in the other car had not been Mexicans—and anything but drunk. Then Diane Cole wouldn't have become so embittered and maybe Fred wouldn't have challenged him so fiercely in class. Fred had raised himself as a barricade on Dan's road to acceptance in Gummery. Here he was—the first Mexican to teach school in this narrow-minded little town.

Why had he wanted to? Why should he want to pull this place together when it was bound to remain split between the two groups? He had a hell of a job.

He looked at his watch. Time to go back out. Fred on the mountain—determined for some crazy reason to stay up there. If anything happened to Fred Dan's plans and ideals would become a hollow mockery. Yeah, he thought. He'd lost. The minute he'd kicked Fred out of class and showed his own vulnerability, he'd lost.

Unless, he told himself, he could get Fred down off that mountain. Break a hole in the walls of the cell. Find a way out.

WITH SCHOOL OVER for the day, the crowd had grown. Some of Dan's students grinned when he drove up. But when they saw Diane, their excited faces sobered.

"Not a stir," said Sheriff Cass. "It goes that way—quiet for awhile, then he cuts loose. You just never know."

Though the sky directly above blazed clear and bright, the canyon was darkening. Across the mountain, almost level with the mesquite tree, ran a ragged shadow. Sundown was near.

"Can't you come down to where he is from behind?" Dan asked.

"How?" Sheriff Cass asked. "You'd have to pack in across country from the river. It would take two days. You should know that, Dan."

"Two days would be too long," cried Diane. "You'll have to try tonight."

"I'm sorry, Miss Cole."

The rifle snapped from the mountain again.

"Damn those kids!" the sheriff muttered.

Some of the students, unsupervised, had moved out into the open, and were peering up at the mesquite. At the shot they screamed and fled, and Sheriff Cass roared at one of the deputies. "He's firing at his own classmates! *He's gone plain crazy with that rifle.*

"Fred!" Diane cried. Her lips had whitened, and she continued to call out pleadingly to her brother, as if unaware that he could not possibly hear her. "Fred stop firing. You'll kill—"

Dan grabbed her. "Miss Cole."

"Those kids are leaving," said Sheriff Cass. "That's what comes of letting one of them help. Next time Kirby Steen comes out here I'm going to—"

"But he is here—right now," cried Diane. "I just saw him!"

"I haven't set eyes on him since the two of you left," said the sheriff.

"But I saw him drive out while I waited for Dan. He's the only one driving a yellow pick-up. You couldn't keep a smart aleck like him away."

"Maybe so," said Sheriff Cass. "But I haven't seen him."

The students argued, angry and unhappy. But the deputies forced them into their cars, and they drove away.

Dan was frowning heavily. "When did you see Kirby, Miss Cole?" he asked.

"About fifteen minutes before you came to my house after me," she replied. "From my bedroom window. Why?"

"Never mind. I'm going for a walk," Dan Ponce said. "You wait here."

He strode up the road through the darkening canyon. Exactly what he intended to do, what had prompted him to go off by himself was a little unclear in his mind.

Beyond a curve in the road he reached Fred's car, the wheels sunk deep in the sand of the half-dry creek. It was as though Fred had been intending to stop on the edge of the creek where the ground was more level when fear or the speed at which he'd been traveling had sent the car crashing into the creek-bed.

The tracks still showed. A few footprints were still visible, though nearly obliterated now by the crisscrossing tracks of curiosity onlookers. A blood-stain darkened the seat cover near the driver's wheel.

Dan tried to follow the prints away from the car, but he quickly lost them in the rock and loose shale. Keeping parallel with the road, he moved away from the car, crossing what was left of the rock foundations of old buildings which had long since crumbled. Farther up the hill gaped the black holes of a few mine shafts. The boards which had once covered them had rotted or fallen away and

not been replaced, and the black holes showed through like cavities in decaying teeth.

If Kirby Steen had not gone to the mountain, he could have parked in only one other place—down stream near a picnic area which was little used on hot summer days. Dan didn't know why he should be suspicious of Kirby. Perhaps it was the boy's tremendous self-assurance, and the love of excitement betrayed by the glittering eyes.

A moment later Dan spied the yellow pick-up down the hill, parked on a foliage-screened stretch of gravel just beyond the picnic tables where it could not be clearly seen from the road.

He started down the slope toward the vehicle, and then paused, struck by the fact that one of the shafts on the slope above him had apparently been boarded up at one time. There were the same gapping holes where some of the boards had rotted away. But here strangely, across the top beam to which the boards had been hammered, a pale strip of wood appeared unweathered, as if one of the boards had only lately been pulled away.

The pick-up below . . . The open shaft above . . .

Dan Ponce climbed to it quickly and inspected the loosened and unevenly replaced board. Inside, on some of the loose dirt piled against the shaft wall there was the unmistakable print of a heel.

Of course! But who would have thought it? It meant Fred Cole was in double danger—from the night cold and his wound and from . . .

If only he'd brought a flashlight! If only there were time enough before dark to get the sheriff! Dan removed a small cigarette lighter from his jacket pocket and snapped it on. He'd have to chance it.

Cautiously he slipped through the opening. The ground, rough under his feet, was a mixture of clods of dirt and loose rocks. He'd taken no more than a dozen steps before darkness closed in around him. The flame of his lighter flickered, and almost went out. The existence of a breeze meant there had to be another opening somewhere, another way out.

Protecting the flame with one cupped hand, Dan moved forward as rapidly as he could. The braces of the tunnel appeared sturdy enough in the shadows—so long as they weren't tampered with. Dust fell on him from above as he continued on with only the flickering glow of the lighter to guide him.

He was careful to stay in the center, away from the walls, and well clear of the braces. After a moment he came to a slight incline, and found the tunnel ahead of him dividing into two dark caverns. He inspected the ground carefully, the clods, and rocks, and

the black shadows. There were no footprints in the descending stretch of earth directly ahead of him.

If he went to the right, he would probably go farther into the mountain. He chose the cavern on his left, and kept on. He tried to hurry, for he was growing impatient, and a little frightened. He did not like the darkness. Quite suddenly he stumbled slightly and the light went out. The cave swallowed him.

He groped, and stumbled again and this time rocks crumbled, and dust choked him. The echo of his fall came back, multiplied, one sound behind the other, and he thought for an instant that the walls were tumbling down upon him.

Then silence. He snapped on the lighter again and what he saw made him drag himself forward with a startled cry, his temples pounding.

Bound hand and foot with thick cord, doubled and redoubled, a body lay sprawled across the tunnel, completely blocking it. Fred Cole was unconscious, but his chest rose and fell with his breathing. His shirt stuck to his wound, but the blood had dried and caked. As quickly as he could, Dan loosened the cords at the youth's wrists and ankles, his fingers fumbling in the semi-darkness.

When he finished, he stepped over the body toward the light. His eyes adjusted slowly to the glare. One step. Another. And then . . . he saw Kirby Steen! The boy was kneeling, his back to the shaft, his shoulders against the mesquite.

The rifle was resting against the rock beside him. The cars below, tiny from this distance, helped protect the people moving about, insect-like, among them. A statement flashed out of Dan's memory: *He's gone plain crazy with that rifle.*

Quietly he drew back. He could scarcely come upon Kirby unseen, unheard. But if he couldn't get to Kirby, perhaps he could lure the boy into the darkness, and drop him to his knees with a quick blow to the jaw. Then suddenly he had a better idea!

Dan carried Fred deeper into the darkness where he would be out of danger from the rifle. Then backing against the side of the tunnel, he called, "Kirby!"

For an instant Kirby remained silent. Then he called out: "Who is it? Fred? Is it you?"

"It's Dan Ponce, Kirby."

"Mr. Ponce—"

Dan heard the safety catch on the rifle snap. He reached down and picked up two rocks as Kirby edged into the tunnel.

"You don't have a gun, do you, Mr. Ponce. You don't or you'd have got me out here. But I'm coming in to get you, Mr. Ponce."

Into the darkness Kirby moved slowly. His silhouette disappeared

as he slipped to the side of the tunnel. Dan heard one step, and then another—soft, silent as a breath.

Now, he told himself. *Before he gets too close.* Abruptly, tensely, he tossed the smallest rock across the tunnel.

Kirby whirled. The rifle echoed through the tunnel as Dan Ponce lunged. He swung his arm, half-spinning, flinging his fist and the rock in it into Kirby's belly. Kirby doubled and the rifle clattered. Dan grabbed it immediately, and shoved Kirby, still hunched and choking, out into the light. It was quiet down below among the cars.

When Kirby, red-faced and heaving, regained his breath, Dan said, "Yell at them down there." And when he hesitated, Dan motioned, "Tell them to come up. Tell them it's safe now."

And Dan Ponce stood where he could be seen so they'd know that it wasn't some kind of a trap.

THE RED LIGHT on the ambulance blinked as Fred Cole was lifted inside on the stretcher.

Diane touched Dan's arm. "I can't believe it," she said. "Kirby would have let him die up there."

"Kirby would have done almost anything," Dan said. And he knew they both remembered Kirby's babbling when he was brought down from the mountain: *Don't think I shot Fred. Don't accuse me of that. Fred got scared. If he hadn't run, the service station man woulan't ever have been able to shoot him.* You drove the car then? And shot the attendant? *I sure did. And I took Fred up the mountain or he'd have gone home to his sister.*

"It was a diabolical scheme," said Dan. "He rubbed out his own footprints, so everyone would think Fred was alone. Even if the attendant survived, Kirby couldn't have been identified because he wore a mask."

A man from the ambulance approached Diane. "Would you like to come with your brother, Miss Cole?"

"Yes," she said. Then to Ponce, "Would—would you come, too, Dan?"

He hesitated. Then he nodded and followed her to the ambulance, walking as though he were moving through an open door out of a stuffy building.

NEXT MONTH: A TRULY BRILLIANT NEW STORY

By SYD HOFF

NIGHT OR DAY?

by ARTHUR PORGES

JIM KEELYN was almost eighty, and seemed as fragile as burnt paper. But he still moved with the suppleness of a cat, and his serene eyes were clear and golden like the best honey.

After his retirement as a detective specializing in homicide, he had turned with relief from murderers, thieves, and swindlers to the most harmless and beautiful of living things—flowers. His garden was a glowing pattern of roses, dahlias, stock, and a dozen other less common kinds of plants. Not merely his thumbs, but all of his stubby fingers must have been green to the bone, for many of the blossoms were flourishing at seasons and in places that would have made a professional horticulturist blink in wonder.

When Detective-Lieutenant Ed Walker found the old man, he didn't expect Keelyn to remember him. After all, it had been nearly twenty years since they were colleagues, and then only briefly—one man on the way out; the other just beginning his career.

But Keelyn brightened at the sight of him. Before his retirement, he had taken Walker's measure, and had recognized in him the most likely to head the department —after proper seasoning, of course.

"Walker, isn't it?" he asked, and his voice was still deep and resonant. His eyes lit up, and he added: "I saw in the paper that you're now bossing the old shop. Congratulations. I predicted it to Captain Harris a good many years ago."

'Thank you," Walker said, al-

A man of eighty may be a little rusty in some ways. But as a murder spotter Keelyn was knife-blade keen.

most stuttering in surprise. To think that the old boy still knew him at a glance. Maybe it wasn't such a wild idea, coming here for help. Eighty or not, Keelyn seemed mighty sharp; in his prime he'd been tops; and in this business, experience did count heavily. This thin little man with the rake had about fifty years of it to draw upon, and the younger man hoped to pick his brains.

Keelyn was eyeing him shrewdly now. Obviously he had guessed this wasn't a social call.

"Just what can I do for you, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Walker said. "I have a hunch about a case—a homicide. But it's only a hunch, and all the evidence seems to be against me. I was about to write it off as one more 'free' killing, when I recalled your work on the Lew Davidson shooting, just before you retired. It occurred to me that if I talked this case over with you—" He broke off, not quite sure whether to go on.

"I see," the old man said, his voice flat. "When I first left the force, I at least looked at newspaper reports of big crimes. But for the last fifteen years, I haven't even bothered with the headlines. What makes you think I could help? I'm as rusty as an old nail in a barn."

"You have the experience, and I don't see any signs of rust," Walker said, with more confidence than he felt. "If you have the interest—and energy—I'd like to have a try."

Keelyn's eyes were bright. "Why not?" he said softly. "I've nothing

but time, and it might be interesting. Go right ahead, Lieutenant. Give me the key facts. Maybe the rust hasn't reached the vital machinery!"

"Good," Walker said. "I hoped you'd feel that way." He paused to collect his thoughts, then with occasional glances at a notebook, outlined the case.

"The victim was a Mrs. Harold Morton. She was clubbed to death, presumably by a burglar, who then ransacked the house. Her husband, a professional photographer, discovered the body—or so he says—on returning that afternoon. It would seem she had been killed after he left in the morning."

"From your summary," Keelyn said grimly, "you don't think it happened that way."

"That's right; I don't. Morton seems to have an alibi. He took a picture of his wife early that morning, which proves she was alive then. After that, his time is fully accounted for until he got home at eleven-thirty A. M. At eleven-forty, he called the police. Now that means he had only ten minutes to kill her and tear the whole place apart. The ransacking is so thorough that it couldn't possibly have been done in less than half an hour. With that time sequence, and the picture, a jury would certainly acquit him."

"So would I," Keelyn said. "What's your objection?"

"I think the picture was faked—taken the night before. Then Morton tore the place apart, taking his time. Next morning he went to work, and then came back to 'discover' the body."

"All right," the old man said. "Where's your evidence?"

"First, motive. Morton was mixed up with several models. One of them, we've learned, had already started to blackmail him. If his wife found out about just one of those affairs she would leave him—and she had all the money in the family. Morton likes to live well."

"That all?" Keelyn's voice was sharp.

"No. The whole thing's too pat. He'd taken no pictures of his wife for years. Why this one all of a sudden? Then there was a paper, clearly dated Wednesday morning, in the photo. My guess is that he got it the night before—you know how those things are printed ahead."

"I also know," Keelyn objected, "that the ones printed the night before usually differ from the next morning's edition. Different headlines, for example."

"That's true," Walker admitted. "And that's why, I'm sure, this paper was carefully placed so that only the day and date can be read with a magnifyer. It just happens to be folded and spread that way!"

"I see your point," the older man said, frowning. "About being so pat. Hmm. But if the photo was

deliberately faked, what about the crime lab? They should be able to prove that."

"It isn't that kind of fake. You can't retouch one of those little color transparencies, and this one was still in the camera as part of a whole spool. No, the trickery was done with light. Walker has plenty of powerful sun-lamps at his studio. I figure he used them the night before, shining them through the windows—the eastern ones—to simulate sunlight. Remember, he's a pro."

"Wouldn't the neighbors have noticed that?"

"None near enough. The Mortons have five acres in a little hollow, and after midnight people in those parts go to bed."

"His wife must have cooperated willingly," Keelyn said.

Walker nodded. "Naturally. She was crazy about him, and if he told her he wanted to try an experiment with her as model, she'd have been delighted."

"There's still the time of death to cross him up," the old man said. "What about that? If she was killed the night before, the body would be quite cold in the morning."

"Not with the heat turned high," Walker told him. "This bird apparently didn't miss a trick. We'll claim the body showed signs of having been dead longer, but the defense will call some other joker to point out all the well-known difficulties, medically speaking, and especially when the room has been heated for hours."

"Did you check for signs that such lamps were actually used?" Keelyn asked.

"Yes, and there are marks on the outer sills that convince me. But again, to a jury, they'd just be vague outlines. Morton undoubtedly took all the equipment back to his studio when he left in the morning, so I can't even prove any of it was in the house."

"And the quality of the sun-lamps is such that the photos are identical with those made by real daylight?" the old man asked.

"Close enough. Morton knows his stuff, and has the best meters to work with."

"I can see what you're up against," Keelyn said. "This man is a rare type—extremely careful and cold-blooded. Most murderers are very much the opposite, as we both know." He reflected for a moment, then asked: "What about the angle of the light? Is it correct for the season."

"So my lab boys tell me. After all, Morton saw sunlight coming through those windows every morning, and could easily match the angle. He says he took the picture about nine, but doesn't claim that's accurate to within more than fifteen minutes or so. That gives some leeway right there."

"Got the picture with you?"

"You bet I have," Walker said.

"If we can go into the house, I'll set up a projector."

"By all means, come in," Keelyn told him, leading the way.

"Be right there," Walker said. "The projector's in my car."

Once in the house, the police lieutenant opened a portable screen, put the projector on a coffee table, and drew the shades. Quickly he brought the picture into focus. It showed Mrs. Morton, a once pretty woman, now faded and rather bovine looking. She wore a foolish simper of the sort some people automatically assume while being photographed.

"Amiable and not very bright," was Keelyn's silent comment as he studied her face.

Sunlight seemed to be streaming into the room. Certainly it was cheerfully golden, and made the whole place bright. Keelyn put on a pair of glasses, and peered more carefully at the newspaper by the woman's elbow. Yes, Walker was right. It seemed a bit too neat that only the day and date, along with the name of the publication, were in focus.

Quietly, the old man moved nearer to the screen, his eyes examining each part of the room in turn. They passed from painting to books to furniture to windowboxes full of flowers—and then they narrowed suddenly.

Walker sensed, rather than saw, that Keelyn had come to attention, and his own pulse leaped.

"What is it?" he asked. "Do you see something I missed?"

"Glory be!" the old man muttered. "To think he tripped up on a point like that."

"Where?" Walker demanded. "What've you got?"

"See those flowers? Not the ones in the windowboxes, but beyond. The ones growing a few feet from the house."

"Sure. What about 'em?"

"Those are a kind of jasmine. I won't get technical, but they're open wide only at night. Never, never will you find them like that in the morning sun. Look at them, boy—they *know* it's night!"

Walker smacked his thigh. "If that's so," he exulted, "we've got Morton cold." Then his face fell. "But wouldn't they close with all those sun lamps shining past them?"

"In time, but sunlamps don't have the same heat from a distance as the sun. But the main point, I'd guess, is that Morton wouldn't have his lights on any longer than was absolutely necessary. A few quick tries for the right angle and intensity, then he'd shoot the picture. He cared nothing about how good it was as a portrait of his wife. If the light was right, and the useful part of the paper legible, that was it.

"The jasmine wouldn't close up that fast. But the discussion's academic, because those open flowers say 'night'. It's no concern of ours

why they didn't close. You can be sure he didn't keep them open on purpose!"

Keelyn shook his head. "It seems to me Morton took a bigger chance of a different sort. How could he be sure some neighbor wouldn't find the body next morning before nine? That would ruin his story about the picture."

"It wasn't much of a risk," Walker said. "Their neighbors knew the Mortons to be night-people, who seldom got up before eight. Nobody calls on a housewife before she has the house straightened out a bit. At worst, they'd think the two of 'em were still sleeping, and leave."

He gave Keelyn a frankly admiring glance. "It's clear that the rust did not reach your brain, sir."

The old man was obviously pleased, but he said: "Nonsense! I succeeded as a gardener, rather than as a detective."

Next Month's Complete MIKE SHAYNE Novelet

INSIDE JOB

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Cases of mistaken identity are by no means a rarity in real life. But this one took Shayne over so many rough hurdles that it turned into a kind of nightmare . . . believable enough, but with a touch of the sinister almost, tangible.

A new Perry Mason story has become so important an event in mystery fiction that it is easy to picture the famed lawyer-detective as the legal custodian of Erle Stanley Gardner's creative energies, determined to let no other pen-created character command so much of Mr. Gardner's time. But not even Perry Mason can travel back through Time and reason with Lester Leith, who had a sobriety-toppling, topsy-turvy kind of gusto, and has enjoyed tremendous popularity too. And here he is in a story which is a tribute to Erle Stanley Gardner's amazing versatility and masterly handling of suspense.

SOMETHING LIKE A PELICAN

by

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Featuring

LESTER LEITH

THE NOONDAY CROWDS had dwindled, and Lester Leith, in no hurry to leave the shopping district, was frankly interested in a pair of dark green meshed nylon stockings—not those which were on display in the department store window to his right—but those which very animatedly adorned the legs of an exceptionally pretty girl some fifty feet in front of him.

In such matters Lester Leith was a connoisseur. But because his interest verged upon the abstract, he made no effort to shorten the distance which separated him from the attractive young lady. Leith liked to stroll and watch the panorama of life streaming past. A few seconds from now his interest might be claimed by a face which showed character, or some passing pedestrian might arouse his curiosity.

At the moment it just happened to be a shapely pair of legs, dimpled-knees ensheathed in nylon hosiery.

Then abruptly, he stopped walking. Half a block away, a woman's head shot out from a fourth floor window, and a pierc-

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ing scream caused a dozen other pedestrians to come to a sudden halt, and stare upwards.

"Help me! Help—*police*—" The scream terminated in a sound difficult to describe—a kind of frantic shouting which gradually subsided.

An instant later a dark furry object was thrown from the window. For a half second it fell as a compact ball. Then the resistance of the air opened it out and it fluttered like a descending parachute. It finally come to rest upon a metallic crosspiece which supported a street sign four stories below.

At his right, Lester Leith heard cynical laughter, and his eyes, seeking the source of merriment, encountered the grinning face on one of those cocksure individuals who is never at a loss to explain the significance of anything that has happened.

"Advertising stunt," the man said, catching Leith's eye. "That's a fur company up there. They must have hit on the screwball idea of throwing fur capes away, to give 'em a lot of publicity."

Leith heard the sound of a police whistle, and saw that the traffic officer or the corner had left his post and was hurrying toward the building.

For reasons of his own, Leith preferred to avoid contact with police officers who were rushing to the scene of a crime. His methods were far too subtle and delicately balanced to invite risk by blundering into a police dragnet.

"Thanks for the tip," he said to the omniscient stranger. "I'm afraid it isn't entirely screwball—from their high-pressure advertising point of view. But I don't intend to be taken in by it."

And Lester Leith deliberately turned his back upon the scene of excited confusion.

II

LESTER LEITH, looking slender and debonair in a faultlessly tailored London suit, stood in the lobby of the theater at the end of the first act and debated whether to wait and see the rest of the performance.

The usual opening night audience of celebrities, drama critics and expensively-gowned women and their attentive escorts, either promenaded around the lobby or formed in little clusters where they engaged in low-voiced conversation.

Many a feminine eye, drifting in the direction of the straight-shouldered, slim-hipped young man, registered approval. But Lester Leith was, for the moment, lost in the problem which had been gnawing at the back of his consciousness all evening. Why should a young woman trying on a silver fox cape in a furrier's on the fourth floor of a loft building, abruptly toss the cape out of the

window, nonchalantly pay the purchase price in cash, and leave the premises, apparently seeing nothing unusual in the incident?

Melodious chimes announced curtain time in two minutes. People began pinching out cigarettes and drifting through the doorways to their seats.

Lester Leith still hesitated. The show, he had to admit, was better than average, but his mind kept returning to the mysterious young woman who had so casually tossed a valuable fur piece out of a four-story window.

Lester Leith removed from his wallet the folded clipping which he had taken from an evening paper. He read it once more:

Pedestrians on Beacon Street were startled this afternoon by the scream of a young woman who leaned from a window of the Gilbert Fur Company in the Cooperative Loft Building four stories above the sidewalk calling for the police. Looking up, they saw a silver fox cape descending toward the sidewalk. The cape spread out, caught the breeze, and finally fell across a rod supporting the sign of the Nelson Optical Company. The screaming woman was later identified as Miss Fanny Gillmeyer, 321 East Grove street, an employee of the fur company.

Officer James C. Haggerty, on duty at the intersection, left his post to rush with drawn revolver into the building, and ascended in an elevator to the fourth floor. As the officer came running down the corridor, he was greeted by F. G. Gilbert, head of the Gilbert Fur Company, who explained that the screamed alarm had been a mistake.

Officer Haggerty insisted upon an investigation which disclosed that a young woman customer, whose name the company refused to divulge, had been trying on silver fox capes. Abruptly, she had said, "I'll take this one," doubled it up, and tossed it out of the window. Miss Gillmeyer, the clerk who had been making the sale, thinking that she was encountering a new form of shoplifting, promptly proceeded to shout for the police.

By the time Mr. Gilbert appeared upon the scene, the cape had lodged on the support of the sign, directly below the window, and the customer was quite calmly counting out bills to the amount of the purchase price. She offered no explanation as to why she had thrown the cape out of the window, and quite casually left instructions covering the delivery of the cape when it was recovered. During the confusion which ensued just prior to the arrival of Officer Haggerty, the young woman, who was described as an attractive blonde some twenty-five years of age, left the building.

Officer Haggerty was inclined

to believe the woman was a publicity-seeking young actress who hoped to get her name in the papers. If this was true, she did not succeed, for the company refused to divulge her name and address. The cape was retrieved, and, after being cleaned, presumably delivered by the Gilbert Fur Company to the eccentric purchaser.

The dimming lights announced that the second act of the play was about to start. Lester Leith, returning the clipping to his wallet, reached a decision and turned toward the street. A passing taxi took him to the Cooperative Loft Building on Beacon Street.

There was nothing about the appearance of the building which offered a clue to the strange behavior of the purchaser of the fur cape. The Gilbert Fur Company occupied the entire fourth floor. The window from which the fur cape had been thrown, was the one directly over the sign of the Nelson Optical Company.

Leith noticed, on the opposite side of the street, two men who seemed to be intent on keeping the building under close observation. The manner in which they loafed on opposite sides of the entrance of the Rust Commercial Building which occupied half a block directly across the street, completely ignoring each other, indicated a certain common purpose.

Moreover, whenever one of the belated office workers left the building, these men converged upon the doorway, only to move casually away again as soon as they got a good look at the emerging company employees.

Leith turned to the driver and said, "We'll stick around here." He settled back to a cigarette and a period of watchful waiting which was terminated after about twenty minutes when a slimly youthful girl in a blue skirt and jacket, wearing a rakish, tight-fitting hat perched at an angle over her right ear, walked out from the elevators across the lobby to the entrance, her trim, smooth-swinging legs carrying her at an extremely rapid pace.

The two watchers swung once more toward the door and this time they didn't veer apart. As the young woman stepped out they grabbed her by both elbows and hurried her across the sidewalk into a car which had seemingly appeared from nowhere. Before the young woman could put up a

struggle she was pushed into the interior of the car.

Lester Leith pinched out his cigarette and said to the taxi driver, "Follow that car which is just pulling out on the other side of the street, and keep it in sight, even if you have to pass traffic lights. I'll make it worth your while."

The taxi driver made a quick U-turn which placed him behind the still slowly moving car, and a red traffic signal enabled him to slide up into an advantageous position.

"No rough stuff?" he asked.

"Not a chance of that," Leith said. "You won't get in any trouble."

The driver studied the license plate of the car ahead. "I don't like passing traffic lights. That could be an unmarked police car."

Leith said, "Not a chance of that either. You can take my word for it."

The driver seemed not too enthusiastic, but he carefully followed the other car until it came to a stop in front of a downtown office building. His worried eye appraised the trio who emerged. "They look like cops to me," he said.

"I've been watching them for some time," Leith said. "The obviousness of their methods, their desire for mutual support, and their complete lack of subtlety are indicative of operatives from a private detective agency—ex-cops perhaps, who were on the force eight or ten years ago."

The taxi driver looked at Lester Leith with sudden respect. "I could have been sticking out my neck," he said. "But I've a feeling you know what you're talking about."

Leith said, "It was just a matter of careful observation," and handed the taxi driver a five-dollar bill. "Keep the change," he said, when the driver looked at him uncertainly.

III

EDWARD H. BEAVER served Lester Leith in the capacity of valet, but his obsequious loyalty was a carefully assumed mask. For some time the police had suspected Lester Leith of stepping outside the law in a strict sense—a man whose keen mind unraveled tangled threads in the skein of crime which they were totally unable to unravel for themselves—a fact which was a blow to their pride.

And all those crimes to which Lester Leith devoted his attention had one peculiar and uniform denouement. When the police, following the sometimes devious but always accurate trail blazed for them by Leith's activities, reached their objectives, they invariably found a somewhat dazed criminal completely stripped of his ill-gotten gains.

It was because of this the police had managed to 'plant' Beaver as an undercover man in Lester Leith's home, where he was known as Scuttle by Leith. Yet, much as the police wanted to catch Leith red-handed, so far Beaver's activities had been no more productive of results than the efforts of those committees selected from an audience to supervise a stage magician in his feats of legerdemain.

Beaver was waiting up when Leith fitted his key to the door of the penthouse apartment. "Good evening, sir. You're home early."

"Yes—earlier than I expected to be," Leith said. "It was good of you to wait up."

"I thought perhaps you'd like a Scotch and soda before retiring. I'll have one in a jiffy. But first let me take your hat and coat. You look just a trifle fatigued, sir. Do you wish to put on your dressing gown and house slippers?"

Leith said, "No. I think I'll remain dressed for awhile, Scuttle. But I'd welcome a Scotch and soda."

Leith stretched out on the sofa and thoughtfully sipped the drink which Beaver had placed at his elbow, while the valet hovered around Leith's chair.

"Scuttle," Leith said at length, "you make it a point to read the papers, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are, as I remember it, quite interested in crime news."

Beaver coughed apologetically. "You'll pardon me for saying so, but ever since you outlined your theory that the newspaper accounts frequently contain some significant fact which points to the criminal, I've made it a habit to read the crime news. It's sort of a mental game I play with myself."

Lester Leith waited until he had taken two more leisurely sips from his glass before saying, "A fascinating pastime, isn't it, Scuttle?"

"Yes, sir."

"But make certain that your solutions are always merely academic and that you keep them only on paper—or better yet in your mind. You know how the police are, Scuttle, over-zealous and unreasonable, and have that inherent suspicion which is the unfailing indication of the prejudiced mind."

"Yes, sir."

Leith yawned, and patted back the yawn with polite fingers. "Scuttle, in your crime reading, have you perhaps run across an account of some crime which took place in the Rust Commercial Building?"

"No, sir. I can't say that I have."

Leith said, "I notice, Scuttle, that on the sixth floor of the Rust Commerical Building is a whole string of offices occupied by the Precision Instrument Designing and Installation Company more generally referred to, I believe, as *'Pidico'*. Have you heard of any

crime which has been committed there?"

"No, sir, I haven't."

Leith stretched, yawned, and said, "Most annoying, Scuttle."

"What is, may I ask?"

"To depend upon the newspapers for information—to know that something in which you are interested has happened, and that it will be twelve to twenty-four hours before you can read about it."

Beaver kept his surprise concealed behind a rigidly immobile poker countenance. His eyes held burning curiosity, but his manner was merely deferential as he said, "Is there anything that I could do to help you, sir? Anything to speed up your investigations—anything at all?"

Lester Leith gave frowning consideration to Beaver's overtures. "Scuttle, could I trust you?"

"You know that very well, sir."

"All right Scuttle, I'll give you an assignment—a very confidential one."

"Thank you, sir."

Leith said, "In the Channing Commercial Building, there's a private detective agency. I didn't bother to look it up. Some men took a young woman there about ten o'clock tonight. They questioned her. Perhaps they turned her loose; perhaps not. If my reasoning is correct, she was an employee of the Precision Instrument Designing and Installation Company. Find out if that is the case. If so, report her name and address to me. If the facts aren't as I've outlined them, then I'm not interested in the matter at all."

"And if it turns out you're right, sir, may I ask the extent of your interest?"

Leith said, "Simply to put my mind at ease by arriving at a logical explanation of an event which has puzzled me."

"And may I ask what the event was?"

Leith briefly described the strange occurrence he had witnessed quite by accident while strolling through the shopping district.

Beaver's eyes glittered. "Oh, yes, I read *that* in the evening paper."

"You have any theories about it?"

"Well, I gave that matter quite a bit of thought and reached a conclusion. I said to myself—if you won't think it's presumptuous, sir—I'll just pretend that I'm Lester Leith reading that newspaper story, and try to find in it the significant clue which the police overlooked." Beaver smiled at Lester Leith.

"You're interesting me very much," Leith said, sipping his Scotch and soda. "And what did you conclude, Scuttle?"

"That the woman was merely a part of a very clever scheme."

"Scuttle, you amaze me!"

"I decided that her sole function was to distract the attention of everyone in the place while a clever confederate was switching price tags!"

"Can you give me a few more details?"

"Yes, sir. Some coats are second-grade, or imitation, and valued at a few hundred dollars. Others are the real thing and valued at from twenty-five hundred to five to ten thousand dollars. Obviously, a person who could switch price tags would be able to take advantage of the situation, and for a relatively small amount get a high-priced coat."

Lester Leith said, "Marvelous, Scuttle! You're doing splendidly."

"Thank you, sir. And do you think that's what happened?"

"Certainly not. But you're improving, Scuttle."

"I beg your pardon?" Beaver asked incredulously.

"I said, 'Certainly not.' "

"You mean you don't think it was the kind of scheme I've just described?"

"No, Scuttle."

"But it's an entirely logical explanation," Beaver insisted, his face flushed. "It's consistent in every respect."

Leith yawned again. "That's why I don't believe it was a price tag switch Scuttle, and now I think I'll go to bed. Don't call me before nine in the morning under any circumstances."

IV

INCANDESCENT LIGHTS blazed down on the cigarette-charred desk of Sergeant Ackley. The air in the building held that peculiar stench which comes to jails, police headquarters, and other places which are inhabited twenty-four hours a day.

Beaver sat across the desk from Sergeant Ackley and said, "I just called on the off-chance you hadn't gone home."

Ackley yawned, ran his fingers through his hair, and said, "That's all right, Beaver, I'd get up in the middle of the night to catch that devilishly clever scoundrel. You say you need this information before nine o'clock in the morning?"

"That's right."

Ackley pressed a button, and when an officer appeared, said, "Find out what detective agency is in the Channing Commercial Building and get the guy in charge on the line."

When the officer had left the room, Ackley rubbed his hand around the back of his neck, yawned, then fished in his handkerchief pocket for a cigar. "And you think it's connected with this shoplifting stunt at the Gilbert place?"

"It seems to be," Beaver said.

Sergeant Ackley lit his cigar, puffed thoughtfully for a few moments, then shook his head emphatically. "Beaver, that's a blind," he said. "That business at the fur com-

pany was a price tag switch—just the way you figured it out. My best guess is, Gilbert will be squawking his head off tomorrow, because someone walked out with a five-thousand-dollar mink coat by making the pay-off for a sixty-five dollar rabbit imitation."

Beaver nodded. "That was what I thought. Leith thinks different."

Sergeant Ackley said, "That's just a line of hooey he's giving you to keep you from knowing what he really had in mind."

"He's fallen for me this time, Sergeant. He's really going to take me into his confidence."

Sergeant Ackley rolled the cigar around to the other corner of his mouth. "Nope," he said, "he's playing you for a sucker, Beaver. That business about the silver fox cape is damn good proof that he's stringing you along. I'll bet there wasn't anything happened over in the Instrument—" He broke off as the phone rang.

Sergeant Ackley scooped up the receiver, jabbed it against his ear, twisted his lips so the end of the cigar was sending the smoke away from his right eye, and said out of the corner of his mouth, "Hello—Sergeant Ackley talking."

There was a moment's silence in the room, then Ackley pulled the cigar out of his mouth, and said, in a voice suddenly crisp with authority, "Oh, this is the Planetary International Detective Service in the Channing Commercial Building, is it? And you're in charge? Okay. This is Sergeant Ackley at headquarters. Now get this and get it straight, because I only want the truth. Have you got a client, the Precision Instrument Designing and Installation Company?

"Oh, you have, eh? I see. Now what kind of work are you doing right now for that company? I don't give a damn whether it's confidential or not. This is police headquarters, and we're working on a

case, and we think that angle enters into it . . . Never mind how we knew about it. We want information, and you aren't going to stall while you call up your client. To hell with the double-talk. We let you guys get by with a lot of stuff in the past, but right now . . . Well, that's better. Okay, shoot."

There was almost three minutes of complete silence while Sergeant Ackley scowled at the telephone, listening to the voice which poured words through the receiver into his attentive left ear.

Then Sergeant Ackley said, "How do you know this girl is the one? . . . Oh, I see. Where is she

now? . . . All right, you guys should have reported that in the first place. Withholding evidence in a burglary case could cost you more than your license. What's that? Hell, you don't have to tell me they don't want any notoriety. But they don't need to have it. We can keep things under cover the same as anyone else. Do you guys up there think you can do better than the whole damn police department? . . .

"Well, that's better. Tell him the truth. Tell him headquarters called up about it and demanded a report. Tell him we know about crimes even when the victims try to keep them secret, and you can tell him that Sergeant Ackley is working on the case personally. In the meantime, you better keep us posted . . . That's right, Sergeant Ackley at headquarters."

Ackley banged up the receiver and then grinned across the desk at Ed Beaver. "The chief's going to get a kick out of that," he said. "They were trying to keep it secret. That gent up at the detective agency damn near fainted, wondering how we knew about it."

"How we knew about what?" Beaver asked.

Ackley said, "An inventor by the name of Nicholas Hodge worked out an improved atomic submarine detector and locator system. They've just recently found out, it seems, that a few people can hear certain types of radiation—not with their ears, but with the hearing center which is located deep in the brain. They hear faint hissing sounds. This new system is tied in with radar and magnifies those radiation sounds so that everyone can hear them. The inventor made a rough model which seemed to do the work.

"He took it up with Washington and the thing got snowed under with red tape. They didn't believe that any one man knew that much about anything atomic. Then he made a contact with one of the admirals in the Pentagon who arranged for a test but insisted that a completely finished instrument be installed for it—one that looked good enough to impress the big shots in the Navy. The precision Instrument Designing and Installation Company was selected for the job.

"Naturally, the thing was carried out in great secrecy. Jason Bellview, the president of the company, and his confidential secretary, Bernice Lamen, were the only ones who knew what it was all about, and where the master blueprints were kept. The other people were simply given a part here and a part there. Those offices of the instrument company are just the designing offices you know. The factory is out of town. Bellview's idea was that he'd split the thing up into parts, and then, at the last minute, Bellview, using a pair of trusted assistants, would assemble them himself."

"And something happened to the blueprints?" Beaver asked.

"Vanished into thin air," Sergeant Ackley said.

"This detective agency is working on it?"

"That's right. They're under contract to take care of all the Instrument Company's business. Bellview called them as soon as he knew what had happened. They suspected Bernice Lamen, laid some sort of a trap for her, and she walked into it. They practically kidnapped her, and are giving her a third degree and getting nowhere."

"So the cops take over!" Beaver said.

Sergeant Ackley said. "We take over, but not until old Jason Bellview comes crawling to us with all of his big-contractor's arrogance gone out of him and asks us to. He was afraid of the publicity. If it ever gets out that those blueprints aren't in his office, or if he can't guarantee that while they were out of his possession no one made copies of them, the Precision Instrument Company is in a hell of a mess."

Beaver grinned. "Nice work, Sergeant."

Sergeant Ackley said, "The chief will enjoy hearing about this."

Abruptly the grin left Beaver's face. Looking at Sergeant Ackley, he frowned thoughtfully.

"Well," Ackley asked, "what is it?"

Beaver said, "How in the devil did Lester Leith know all this?"

Ackley eyes reflected the mental jolt this question gave him.

Beaver said, "It was something that had to do with throwing that silver fox cape out of that window."

"Nonsense, Beaver. Don't be silly. That's just a red herring he's using."

Beaver said suddenly, "Say, Sergeant, the Instrument Company's offices are right across the street from the fur company. Do you suppose you could see into the window—"

Sergeant Ackley shook his head. "The Instrument Company is on the sixth floor. The furrier's on the fourth."

Beaver said doggedly, "Well, the furrier's in a loft building."

Sergeant Ackley's eyebrows leveled. "You may have something there," he admitted. Then he went on to add hastily, "But I doubt it."

V

LESTER LEITH, over a breakfast of coffee, toast, and scrambled eggs, listened to Beaver's report.

"Very interesting, Scuttle, and I should say, quite complete. How did you get your facts?"

Beaver coughed, and for the moment covered his mouth with his hand. "A young woman in whom I'm interested is keeping company with a police detective at headquarters," he said.

"Oh, that's right. You've men-

tioned that before. I'm not certain that I approve the ethical aspects of the situation, Scuttle, but the relationship seems to have been signally productive of information."

"Yes, sir."

"And you're quite certain that Jason Belleview consulted the police?"

"Yes, sir," Beaver said. "After midnight."

"Let's run over the story once more, Scuttle."

"Yes, sir. Bellview placed the master blueprints in his vault. The big door is kept open during the day, but is closed and locked at night. Nicholas Hodge, the inventor of the device, and Bellview had just finished a preliminary conference. The blueprints had been placed in the vault. Bellview had an important matter to attend to, and excused himself for a few moments, leaving Hodge waiting in an office which adjoined his private office.

"Bernice Lamen, Bellview's secretary, had opened and sorted the early afternoon mail in her own office and was just bringing it to Mr. Bellview's private office, or so she said. She had just entered the office when she heard the screaming from across the street. Naturally, many of the employees ran to the windows to look out. Bernice Lamen says she heard the door slam in the private office—the exit door—as though someone had hurriedly walked out. She assumed at the moment it was Mr. Bellview."

"But it wasn't Bellview?"

"No, sir. Mr. Bellview says he was in another part of the building. Whoever it was, got the plans out of the vault. He seemed to know where to go for them."

"Any chance someone entered the offices from the outside?" Leith asked. "Some one not connected with the company?"

Beaver shook his head. "No, sir. Frank Packerson, who has charge of the house organ, had been trapshooting over the week end. He'd brought his gun to the office, and as soon as he heard the commotion across the street, he grabbed the gun, loaded it, and jumped out into the corridor. Hodge, the inventor, was the only man who appeared who wasn't connected with the company. And, of course, Hodge would hardly steal his own blueprints."

Leith frowned thoughtfully. "How about Bernice Lamen?" he asked.

"The private operatives watched the building last night. Miss Lamen returned to the offices. She said she was behind with her confidential filing. The detectives regarded that as being highly suspicious, so they nabbed her. You see, sir, a guard was instantly placed at the door to see that no one took the blueprints *out*. They must be still concealed in the offices. The thief removed them from the safe and hid them."

Leith said, "The detectives searched Miss Lamen?"

"Yes, sir, and found nothing."

Leith smiled, and fell silent for a moment, as if thinking over what Beaver had said.

Leith raised his eyebrows. He said, "I find myself irritated by the stupidity with which the police have handled the entire matter. However, my interest in these matters, Scuttle, is purely abstract —an academic speculation, you might say."

Beaver looked nonplussed. "I'm afraid I don't get you, sir."

Leith smiled. "Perhaps not, Scuttle," he agreed.

THE WOMAN WHO ran the theatrical employment agency looked up at Lester Leith. At first, her smile was merely professional, but as her eyes took in the well-knit figure, the keen alert eyes, the straight nose and smiling lips, her manner suddenly became more personal and intimate.

"*Good* morning," she said, in a tone which had far more cordiality in it than was customarily given to unknown visitors.

Lester Leith smiled down at her. "I'm a writer," he said. "I thought perhaps you could help me—"

The smile struggled against a frown and lost. "There's absolutely no opening for writers," she said, cutting him short. "We don't handle literary material ourselves, and we don't handle plays of—"

"Feature writing," Leither went on, "writing from an unusual angle—the human interest behind the news."

The frown faded somewhat. "It sounds quite interesting, the way you express it. But I'm afraid we couldn't do you any good."

"I really write for a hobby," said Lester Leith. "And I'm not asking you to place my work."

"What did you want then?"

"An actress who would like a bit of publicity."

The woman at the desk said, "None of them are adverse to publicity."

"I want an actress," Leith said, "who has had some stage experience, and knows she has a long road to go before she sees her name in lights on Broadway."

"You won't find many actresses like that any more," the woman interrupted wearily. "The young people today think of Hollywood, and of becoming a stage star overnight."

Lester Leith said, "The girl I have in mind doesn't necessarily have to be youthful."

She regarded him somewhat quizzically. "There's one waiting in the outer office," she said, "who has done everything from road companies, off-Broadway and soap operas on television. She really has talent, but—well, she isn't young any more."

"How old *is* she?" Leith asked.

The woman smiled. "Well—she

gave her age as thirty-three. She could pass for that, but I'm pretty sure she's crowding forty. I have to admire her for the way she keeps up her courage."

"What's her name?"

"Winnie Gail."

"Would she be interested in working for me—as a model?"

"I don't think so. She wants to be an actress or nothing. But you can talk with her."

Leith said, "Let's call her in."

Winnie Gail proved to be a rather attractive woman who was impatient to know exactly where she stood. She interrupted Lester Leith's preliminary talk with a direct question, "Have you ever done any writing?"

"No," Leith admitted, "and it really has nothing to do with what I want you to do. I want you to pose for a picture story with a human interest slant. You'll get five hundred dollars for two hours' work—plus, of course, a fur coat."

"Plus a *what*?"

"A fur coat—that is, a silver fox cape."

Winnie Gail's big brown eyes stared at Leith. "Now listen," she said, "is this on the up-and-up?"

Leith nodded. "I'm quite serious. The silver fox cape is a kind of bonus."

"I get this money in cash?"

Leith nodded again.

"When?"

"Now."

"What do I have to do?"

"Throw a fur cape out of a window, and then tell me exactly how you felt when you did it."

Winnie Gail glanced at the startled woman behind the desk, then looked at Lester Leith. "You're crazy," she said. "But if you have five hundred dollars to throw away, I'm your woman."

Lester Leith opened his wallet, and counted out ten fifty-dollar bills.

Winnie Gail said softly, "Well, I'll be damned! The man's serious."

VI

F. G. GILBERT, head of the Gilbert Fur Company, regarded Lester Leith with coldly calculating eyes.

"So you see," Leith explained affably, nodding toward Winnie Gail who wore her almost-new clothes with an air of distinction, "I've brought my own customer. I

will, of course, buy the silver fox cape at retail prices."

Gilbert's expression did not change.

"Miss Gail," Lester Leith went on with a smile, "is an actress. She expects to get considerable publicity out of this, and as far as you're concerned—well, having the Gilbert Fur Company mentioned prominently in connection with news and magazine stories shouldn't do you any harm."

Gilbert frowned through his glasses. "You aren't a newspaper reporter?"

"No."

"A press agent?"

"Well, in a way. I have Miss Gail's publicity at heart."

Gilbert's appraisal of Miss Gail spoke volumes. "I'm not certain this store desires *that* sort of publicity."

Leith shrugged his shoulders. "As you wish," he said. "Of course, there's the purchase of a silver fox cape."

Gilbert said, "Just a minute. I'll have to confer with my advertising manager. I'll be right back."

He stepped into his private office and called police headquarters. "A man by the name of Lester Leith," he said, "claims to be a feature writer. He's here with an actress who wants to throw another silver fox cape out of the window, and, at the same time, have Miss Fanny Gillmeyer, who was the clerk who screamed for the police yesterday, do the same thing all over again today. He has also brought a photographer to take some pictures of the actress. Will I be charged with felonious assault if I kick him downstairs?"

The desk sergeant said, "Hold the phone. I'll put you in touch with Sergeant Ackley."

A moment later, Sergeant Ackley came on the wire, and Gilbert explained the matter in detail.

Ackley's voice was eager. "Listen, just don't let him change his mind. Stall him along for fifteen minutes. That's all I want. Fifteen minutes to get there in a squad car."

Gilbert returned to the outer office. "Okay," he said, "but if you want Miss Gillmeyer to repeat what she did yesterday you'll have to wait a few minutes. She's busy with another customer. However, I suppose you'll want to set your cameras and do a bit of rehearsing?"

Lester Leith took charge of operations with a meticulous attention to detail. "You see," he said, "yesterday, the fox cape caught on the cross piece support of the sign down below and didn't fall to the sidewalk. But that was only because an element of chance entered into the situation. Today, undoubtedly the cape will reach the sidewalk. Now then, what'll happen? Will someone pick it up and run off with it, or will the person who finds it be honest and return

it? In any event, we want a series of action photographs."

In the matter of a few minutes, the photographer had set his cameras and lights and indicated that he was about ready. "Now listen," he said to Leith, "when the action starts, I've got to work fast. Keep everybody out of my way. That's essential."

Leith nodded. "I'll see you have plenty of elbow room," he promised.

Gilbert looked at his watch, then motioned to the young woman who was standing near by. "All right, Miss Gillmeyer," he said, "come over here . . . You can go ahead any time now," he said to Leith.

But nearly ten minutes elasped before Lester Leith was ready—ten minutes during which the tension in the room had perceptibly mounted.

Abruptly, Lester Leith said, "Okay, let's go."

Winnie Gail walked over to the window, hesitated a moment, then tossed out a silver fox cape. Fanny Gillmeyer thrust her head out of the window and screamed for the police. Pedestrians on the street below stared up in frozen-faced curiosity. Across the street, the office workers in the Rust Commercial Building paused in whatever they were doing, to stare. The photographer jumped from one camera to the other, then snatched up the speed graphic, leaned out of the window, and started shooting pictures at a furious rate.

VII

SERGEANT ACKLEY sat in conference with Captain Carmichael at police headquarters. A pile of photographs was on the desk.

"He doesn't know you've got these pictures?" Carmichael asked.

Sergeant Ackley shook his head. "I put pressure on the photographers, told them just enough to make them realize it was important business."

Captain Carmichael picked up the photos, and studied them thoughtfully. He opened a drawer in his desk, took out a magnifying glass, and moved it over one of the pictures. "Interesting," he said.

"You got something?" Sergeant Ackley inquired eagerly, walking around to look over Captain Carmichael's shoulder.

The police captain tapped a portion of the photograph. "Notice," he said, "you can actually identify the people who are at the windows of the Precision Instrument offices. You can even see what's going on in the offices themselves. There's a woman standing in front of the vault door."

"That's our own plant," Sergeant Ackley said. "Believe me, she's sure on the job. As soon as she heard the alarm, she didn't even look to see what it was. She

just beat it for the safe, and stood there on guard. That's Ann Sherman, and they don't slip anything over on *her*! We planted her there today."

Captain Carmichael rubbed his hand thoughtfully over the top of his head. "I wonder," he said musingly, "if that isn't what spoiled things for Leith."

"What do you mean?"

"He hadn't counted on the woman who took Bernice Lamen's place being from headquarters. Perhaps he was hoping the vault would be unguarded, just as it was for a moment yesterday."

"But the blueprints have already been stolen," Sergeant Ackley said. "What good would it do to give somebody the opportunity to steal them again?"

Captain Carmichael pursed his lips, puffed out his cheeks, and blew thoughtfully. Slowly his eyebrows crept together in a scowl. "Dammit, Sergeant," he said, "that's exactly what he wanted, and Ann Sherman being on the job, kept him from getting results. We should have thought of that.

"Don't you see? Those blueprints are bulky. Whoever stole them hasn't been able to get them out of the building. The blueprints are still there, hidden somewhere. The thief has probably memorized them enough to know the real secret of the new atomic submarine detector device. Now he'd like to get them *back into the vault*."

"I don't see why."

Captain Carmichael said patiently, "Because every inch of those offices was searched by the police, immediately after Jason Bellview got in touch with you. We didn't find a damn thing. Tell Jason Bellview to apologize to Bernice Lamen and get her back on the job. Then give Lester Leith a free hand."

"What do you mean by a *free hand*?"

"Exactly what I said. The thief has hidden the blueprints. We don't know where they are. Leith doesn't know where they are. The excitement over in the fur company enabled the thief to steal the blueprints in the first place. Leith thought that by duplicating that commotion, he'd give the thief an opportunity to put the blueprints back in the safe. It might have worked, but Ann Sherman being so damned efficient and placing

herself next to the vault knocked Leith's scheme into a cocked hat."

Sergeant Ackley said doggedly, "I still don't see how—"

"That's," Captain Carmichael interrupted, "exactly why I told you to give Leith a free hand. I don't know whether you've ever seen the Chinese method of catching fish, Sergeant."

The exasperated Sergeant Ackley said nothing, and looked politely at his superior.

Captain Carmichael went on: "The oriental method of catching fish is to put a rope around the neck of the fish-eating bird so he can't swallow. The bird drops into the sea and grabs half a dozen fish. He can't swallow 'em, so he comes back to the surface, and the wily Chinese has half a dozen nice live fish, caught without any effort on his part."

Sergeant Ackley's eyes glistened. "What's the name of that bird?" he asked eagerly.

Captain Carmichael frowned. "I think they call it a cormoratt, or perhaps it's a cormorant."

Sergeant Ackley said, "I'd like to have one of those birds to take up on that lake where I spend my summer vacation! The lake was well stocked with fish that wouldn't bite, and—"

"We're talking about blueprints," Captain Carmichael cut in. "Remember?"

"Yes, Captain," Sergeant Ackley agreed resignedly.

"Lester Leith is going to be our cormorant. He'll get the stolen blueprints for us and then have to disgorge them."

"What the hell does a cormorant look like?" Sergeant Ackley asked, still thinking about his lake in the mountains.

Captain Carmichael said vaguely, "He's something like a pelican."

Sergeant Ackley pushed back his chair, "Well, I get the idea all right. We'll make our friend Leith something like a pelican."

Captain Carmichael issued one last warning. "You be damned certain," he said, "that you keep a rope tied around his neck. That's the most important thing in the way the Chinese fish. Otherwise, the birds would swallow everything they get."

Sergeant Ackley said confidently, "Leave it to me, Captain." He left the room, but was back, however, within a few seconds. "Say, Captain, don't think I'm nuts, but where could a man buy one of those birds that are like a pelican?"

Captain Carmichael fixed him with a baleful eye. "In China," he said.

VIII

LESTER LEITH pressed the button of Apartment 2-B. The card below bore the names of two persons: *Bernice Lamen,* who was

the confidential secretary of Jason Bellview, and *Millicent Shilman.*

After a moment, the buzzer sounded, and Lester Leith walked up two flights of stairs to Apartment 2-B. The young woman who answered his knock was cool, collected, and very much on her guard. "Yes—what is it?" she asked.

"I'd like to talk with Miss Bernice Lamen."

"Miss Lamen is not at home."

Lester Leith eyes softened into twinkling appraisal of the stern young woman on the threshold. "You," he asked, "are Miss Shilman?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps I can talk with you."

For a moment, she studied him. Then her expression became a little less harsh and she inquired, "What do you want?"

"I take it, because you're sharing an apartment with Miss Lamen, that your relationship is a friendly one?"

"Yes, we're friends—have been for years."

Leith said, "I'm a writer."

There was alarm in her voice. "A newspaper reporter?"

"No," he said quickly. "I'm just a beginning writer. I'm not making a living at it. It's something of a hobby with me."

"I see," she said frowning dubiously.

Leith regarded her steadily, a look of concern in his eyes. "Your friend has been placed in a most unsatisfactory position," he said.

"In what way?"

"If I were she, I'd want to prove myself innocent."

"How?"

Leith's voice showed surprise. "Why, by seeing that the guilty person was exposed and charged with the crime, of course."

For a long moment, the woman in the doorway hesitated. Then her face softened in a smile. "Oh, come on in," she said impulsively. "I'm Bernice Lamen. Milicent is over there by the window. Milly, this is Mr.—What did you say your name was?"

"Leith, Lester Leith."

"Well, come on in and sit down."

As Leith settled himself in the chair she had indicated, she sized up the expensive tailor-made suit he was wearing, and said, "You don't look like a hungry writer."

"I'm not," Leith said. "I'm a good writer."

Milicent said hastily, "Bernice didn't mean—"

Bernice interrupted, "Skip it. He's kidding." She smiled at Lester Leith. "Just why did you come here?" she asked.

"To find out who stole those blueprints."

Milicent said, "I understood someone threw a fur cape out of the window over in the furrier's again this afternoon."

"I did," Leigh said calmly.

"You did!" Bernice exclaimed.

Leith smiled, and said with a slight wave of his hand, "It was, of course, the obvious thing to do."

Bernice glanced at Milicent, then leaned forward to regard Lester Leith from under level brows. "Now, let's get this straight. You mean *you* threw a fur cape out of the window again this afternoon?"

"Oh, I didn't do it myself," Leith said. "I engaged a young woman to do it—a very talented actress. You see, I wanted to have her give me an exclusive interview, telling me how it felt to throw an expensive fur cape out a four-story window."

Again the young women exchanged glances. Bernice Lamen, her tone perceptibly cooler, said, "Well, I'm afraid I can't do anything to help you, Mr. Leith."

Leith opened the small brief case he was carrying, took out some photographs, and said, "These are some pictures we took, showing the entire episode. Most interesting, don't you think?"

After a moment's hesitation, the two young women moved closer to study the photos. Leith took a magnifying glass from his pocket, and said, "You can see a great many details. Look at this picture of the crowd leaning out of the window over at the Precision Instrument Designing and Installation Company. I daresay you can recognize many of your fellow workers, can't you, Miss Lamen?"

"I should say I can, even without the glass. Why, there's—"

Leith interrupted her to indicate one of the windows with the point of his lead pencil. "Isn't this," he asked, "the window of Jason Bellview's private office?"

Miss Lamen nodded.

"I notice what appears to be the back of a young woman standing right here. Would that be near the vault?"

"Yes," Miss Lamen said. "The vault door is just behind her."

"This man, I take it, is Jason Bellview?"

"Yes." Miss Lamen seemed surprised, as if she found it hard to believe a camera trained on a window could show so much of the interior of a room.

Lester Leith moved the point of the pencil again. "Someone over here is holding a broomstick in his hand," he said.

She stared intently at the photograph for an instant, then chuckled. "That's not a broomstick. It's a gun."

"A rifle?" Leith asked.

"No," Bernice said, smiling, "a shotgun. The man who's trying to play hero is Frank Packerson, the editor of our house organ, the *Pidico News*. He's a trapshooting enthusiast. They say he spends a great deal of his salary on guns and ammunition."

"Does he do his trapshooting in the office?" Leith asked.

"Naturally not. He'd been out in

the country shooting over the weekend. He got back to town too late Monday morning to go to his apartment, so he brought his gun up to the office and left it there, as he does occasionally. That's one of his guns."

"I see," Lester Leith said. "And he's on the look-out for burglars in this picture, I suppose?"

"I guess so. He really did a good job yesterday. He grabbed his shotgun and rushed out into the corridor as soon as he heard Miss Gillmeyer screaming for the police across the street. He says no one except the inventor and, a few moments later, Mr. Bellview appeared in the corridor. That shows pretty conclusively that the taking of the blueprints was an inside job, and that—that—"

"Go on," Leith said.

"That they weren't taken out as far as the corridor. They must be concealed somewhere in the offices."

"How many offices would be available as places of concealment?"

She said, "I've been thinking that over. There is a whole string of them. They all have communicating doors, and then there's the corridor which runs the entire length of the offices. But the point is Mr. Leith, that no one went along the corridor and no one crossed the corridor. Packerson is positive on that point. He'd have fired in a minute if he'd seen anything that was suspicious—such as someone running away."

"That would mean, then, that the blueprints must have been hidden somewhere in the string of offices which are next to the windows that open on the street?" Leith asked.

"Yes."

Leith said, indicating the photograph with a gesture of his hand. "Somewhere in the area which is covered in this photograph."

"That's about right."

Leith tapped a spot on the photograph with the point of his lead pencil. "Who's this?"

She frowned, said, "Let me see through that magnifying glass, please! It's a little hazy."

Leith gave her the glass.

"Oh, yes. That's Tarver Slade.

He's a man who showed up four or five days ago to go over our books."

"An auditor?" Leith asked.

"Oh, no. Just one of those State tax men who come and go at intervals for a check-up. No one pays very much attention to them. They're terrible pests, want you to stop everything to explain little simple points. If we took them seriously, we'd never get any work done. Nowadays, we just give them an office and let them go."

Lester Leith said, "This man seems to be putting on an overcoat."

"Yes. I've noticed that if the weather's at all cold, he wears his overcoat whenever he goes out. I guess he has rheumatism. At times he walks with a pronounced limp, then again he seems all right."

Lester Leith took out a notebook and made a cryptic entry. "Just jotting down the names of these people," he explained. "Now, can you give me a few more names from the photos?"

Taking Leith's pencil, Bernice Lamen checked off the various persons whose faces appeared in the window, calling more than a dozen of them by name. Four or five whose heads were bent down, looking at the sidewalk, she couldn't recognize.

Lester Leith slipped the enlarged photos back into his brief case. "Thank you very much, Miss Lamen. I think I have all the material I'll need to write a convincing feature story."

"Mr. Leith," Millie Shilman said, "please be frank with us. What are you after?"

"Why, I've just told you. A human-interest story."

"Surely you don't expect us to believe a person would go to all this expense to get material for a story he only *hoped* to sell."

"Human motives are complex," Leith said. "What may seem foolish from your point of view may be the opposite of foolish from mine."

Leith walked over to the door, paused with his hand on the knob. "Even if we don't see eye to eye about human interest stories, I'm more than grateful for your help," he said, and quietly left the apartment.

AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK the following evening Edward H. Beaver entered a drugstore phone booth, dialed police headquarters, and got Sergeant Ackley on the line.

"Beaver," Ackley growled, "what the hell gives with Lester Leith?"

"He's becoming a writer," Beaver said. "He got the inspiration for a story, and had to start on it right away. He picked up a lot of second-hand furniture, typewriters, filing cases, and had them delivered by taxicab. He's turned the apartment into a kind of writer's work shop."

Sergeant Ackley groaned. "You never know, he said, "whether the damn fool's kidding you, or actually slipping something over. What's he doing now?"

"Typing away at the story," Beaver said.

"What sort of a story?"

"About how a woman feels when she throws a fur cape out of the window. Do you want me to wait up?"

Sergeant Ackley said with exasperation in his voice, "Hell, no! Go to bed."

IX

THERE WAS A subtle tension throughout the offices of the Precision Instrument Designing and Installation Company. Beneath the routine exterior of a smoothly functioning business organization was that strain which manifests itself in surreptitious glances and whispered conferences in the rest rooms.

Frank Packerson, editor of the *Pidico News,* sat in his private office, a pencil in his hand, aimlessly doodling on a sheet of paper.

The intercom buzzer sounded, and Packerson mechanically threw the lever which made the connection. The voice of the girl at the information desk said, "A man is here with a manuscript which he is willing to sell for five hundred dollars to the *Pidico News.*

Packerson was startled. "Tell him we don't buy unsolicited manuscripts. All of our material is staff written. You might tell him also that they don't allow me five hundred dollars an issue."

"Yes, Mr. Packerson. I informed him of that, but he insisted I should notify you. He also has a gun he wishes to sell."

"A gun?"

"Yes, sir."

Packerson was interested. "What sort of a gun?"

"He says it's a genuine Ithabore over-and-under which he's willing to sell for fifteen dollars. He says it's in perfect condition."

"A genuine Ithabore!" Packerson exclaimed.

"That's what he says."

"For fifteen dollars?"

"Yes, sir."

Gun enthusiast that he was, Packerson could no more resist such a bargain than a baseball fan could turn down a free ticket to the World Series.

"Tell him to come in."

"Yes, Mr. Packerson."

Packerson had expected some shabbily-dressed, apologetic individual, with semi-destitution written all over him. He was hardly prepared for the suave, well-dressed man who entered his office, carrying a brief case in his right hand and two leather gun cases over his left shoulder.

Instantly suspicious, Packerson said, "I'm sure you understand, I'm not buying guns from persons

whom I know nothing about. I'll want a complete history of the gun."

"Oh, certainly," Lester Leith said. "I'm prepared to give you a bill of sale."

"I want more than a bill of sale. I'll want to know something about you. That price is—well, absurd for a genuine Ithabore over-and-under."

Lester Leith laughed. "I could make the price one hundred dollars if it would make you feel any happier."

Packerson flushed. "I'm only interested in getting another gun if the price is right. I'd hardly anticipated dealing with a well-dressed stranger who very apparently has another gun, he would not part with for so trivial a sum. I think you can appreciate my position, Mr.—er—"

"Leith," his visitor said. "Lester Leith."

"Well, I think you see my position."

Lester Leith laughed. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Packerson, I am willing to sell this Ithabore cheap because I simply can't hit a thing with it, whereas I have a Betterbilt that simply knocks 'em dead."

Packerson shook his head. "I don't like the Betterbilt. I like an Ithabore over-and-under, without too much drop in the stock."

Leith said, "You should like this gun then." He opened one of the gun cases, and Packerson gave the gun a casual inspection, then put it together, tried the lock, swung it up to his shoulder once or twice, and turned to Leith with a puzzled expression.

"How much did you say you wanted for this?"

"Fifteen dollars."

Packerson stared at him suspiciously.

"For reference," Leith said, "you can ring up my bank."

"If I did—I'd still find the fifteen dollar price disturbing. I don't like mysteries—not when I'm buying a gun."

Leith hesitated for a moment. Finally he said, "I'll be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Packerson. I think there's a little bulge in the barrel. It's only visible in a bright light. If you'll step over to the window and hold the rifle at an oblique angle, letting the sun shine along the barrel you'll notice it—a peculiar line of half-shadow."

Packerson walked over the the window, pushed the gun barrel out into the sunlight, and studied it thoughtfully. Lester Leith remained at Packerson's desk, smoking a cigarette, a slightly amused smile on his face.

After a few minutes of close scrutiny, Packerson turned back to say, "Well, there may be a slight bulge. I would say it was worth considerably more than fifteen dollars, however."

Leith said, "Well, to tell you the

truth, Mr. Packerson, I thought if I'd make the price sufficiently attractive I could get you to look at my manuscript."

Packerson shook his head emphatically. "We don't buy any outside material."

Leith said with dignity, "Under those circumstances, I think I'd prefer to give some other editor an opportunity to look at the gun."

Packerson's face colored. "So that's your game! You want to bribe me to buy a manuscript for five hundred dollars that may well be completely worthless by selling me an Ithabore for about a tenth its actual value. Why, you're just an ordinary crook! Get out of here! What sort of man do you take me for?"

Lester Leith shrugged, picked up his brief case, swung the leather gun cases over his shoulder and walked out, while Frank Packerson followed him to the door to finish what he had to say.

X

LESTER LEITH was just leaving the building when he saw Bernice Lamen step from a bus at the corner and start walking with quick steps in his direction. He waited until she saw him, then raised his hat.

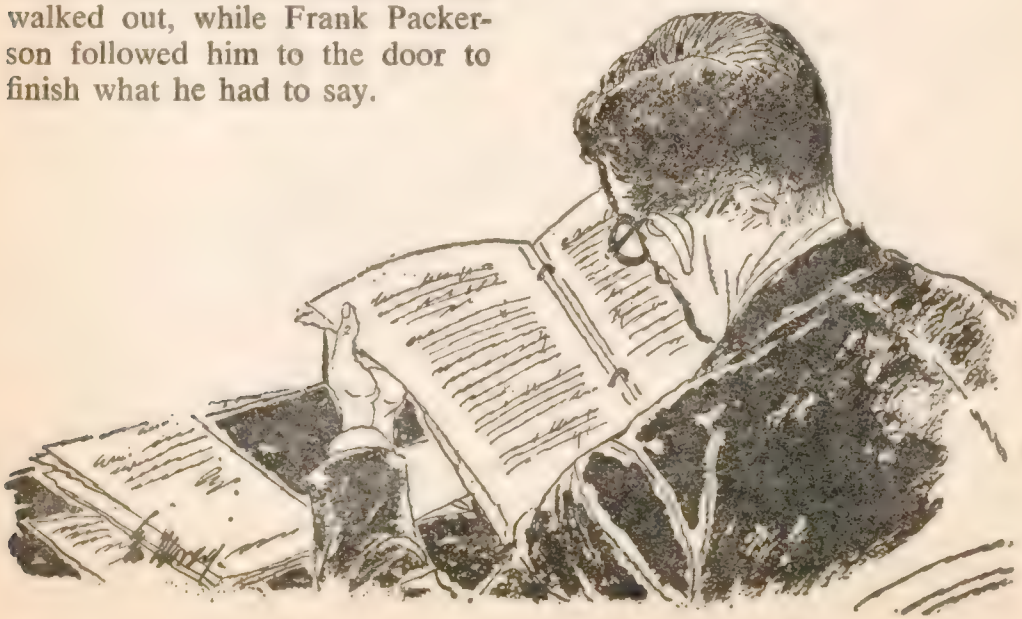
She stopped to stare at him in astonishment. "What in the world!" she exclaimed.

Leith said, "You look happy."

"I am. But what are you doing with that arsenal?"

Leith said, "I was hoping to persuade Mr. Packerson to publish my article by making him a present of a gun. But he was decidedly uninterested."

"Naturally," Bernice Lamen said. "The *Pidico News* is a house



organ. His secretary and all of the other employees supply him with all the material he needs. He writes most of the contents himself. Besides he doesn't have a budget to buy any outside manuscripts."

Leith said, "Money wasn't the big inducement. I wanted to see my name in print."

She studied him with a puzzled frown, drawing her finely arched brows into a straighter line. "Are you serious?"

"Never more serious in my life, but let's not talk about my troubles. What makes you look so happy?"

She said, "I've just received a personal apology from Jason Bellview and was asked to return to work."

"You mean, you've been vindicated?"

"Well, at least they've decided I can return to work."

Leigh said thoughtfully, "I don't see how that could justify your feeling jubilant, after the shabby way they treated you. They discharged you without giving you an opportunity to clear yourself."

Bernice said, "If you were dependent on a salary and if being let out under suspicious circumstances would prevent you from getting a job anywhere else I'm sure you'd realize what a relief it is to know you won't have to worry about where your next meal is coming from."

"That bad?" Leith asked.

"It was that bad, and worse."

"Under the circumstances," Leith said, "we need a drink. You to celebrate, I to recuperate."

"I've got to go to work."

Leith said, "On the contrary, that is just about the worst thing you could do."

"What do you mean?"

"Where's your sense of independence? Are you going to let them insult you, drag you down to the office of a private detective, grill you, and let the police take over without coming to your defense and then rush back to work the instant they decide they've made a mistake."

"Why not?"

"Because there are better ways. You should make them respect you. You should demand a *public* apology and some remuneration for the inconvenience they've caused you—to say nothing of the damage they've done to your reputation."

"I'm afraid I'm not built that way."

Leith surveyed her critically. "There is," he said, "nothing wrong with your build."

She flushed, then laughed. "Really, Mr. Leith, I'm sorry about your story having been rejected, but I can't stand here chatting. I've work to do."

Leith indicated his parked car. "Couldn't you postpone it for about thirty minutes—just long enough to have a drink?"

Bernice Lamen hesitated.

"And if you'd let me handle Jason Bellview," he said, "I'm quite certain I can persuade him to apologize to you in front of the entire office staff."

She said, "I'd just love to have that happen, but it's asking too much. You don't know what kind of a man Bellview is."

Leith said, "Suppose we talk it over while we're having a drink."

"I don't want to go to the office with liquor on my breath," she protested. "But I will have a cup of coffee."

Leith said, "I know where they make some marvelous spiced coffee with brandy and cinnamon bark, orange peel, and—Oh, come on. We'll talk it over there."

Fifteen minutes later, over a restaurant table, they watched a deft waiter mix ingredients, saw the blue flame of burning brandy flicker upward to cast an aromatic halo about the bowl as he stirred the mixture with a silver ladle. Then, when he had lifted out two cups of the spiced beverage and discreetly withdrawn, Lester Leith said, "At least let me ring up Jason Bellview."

"What would you tell him? I don't see—"

Leith said, "I'd tell him that he had done you a great injustice and that you have no intention of returning to work unless he's prepared to pay you ten thousand dollars and make a public apology. Then, after a little trading, I'd settle for five thousand."

She said, "Five seconds after you telephoned, I'd be out of a job again."

Leith gravely took a money-clip from his pocket. From it he took ten one-hundred-dollar bills and placed them in a neat pile on the tablecloth. "I have one thousand dollars," he said, "which says that you're completely mistaken about that."

She stared at the money, then raised her eyes to his face. "You're the most peculiar man I've ever met."

"You've paid me a very high compliment," Leith said. "In these days of widespread mediocrity, it's something to be outstanding, even if it seems to point to a mild kind of insanity."

"There's nothing mild about it," she said, laughing. "Are you really serious about all this?"

Instead of answering, Leith caught the waiter's eye, said, "Bring me a telephone, please."

The waiter brought a telephone with an extension cord, and plugged it in at the table. Lester Leith consulted his notebook and swiftly dialed a umber.

Bernice Lamen watched him with apprehensive eyes.

"Hello," Leith said, "I want to talk with Mr. Jason Bellview. Tell him it's about the missing blueprints."

During the interval which

elapsed while Leith was waiting for Jason Bellview to come on the line, Bernice Lamen said, "In about ten minutes I'm going to think this was just the most insane thing I've ever let anyone talk me into agreeing to. I'm sure I'll be very sorry tomorrow morning. But right now I'm curious and—"

A heavy masculine voice came over the wire, saying, "Yes, this is Bellview. What do you want? What is all this about the blueprints?"

Lester Leith said softly, "I wanted to talk with you about Miss Lamen."

"What about her?"

Leith said, "You've harmed her reputation, and subjected her to a most humiliating experience."

"Who is this talking?" Bellview roared in a voice so loud that it seemed as if his words might rip the receiver apart.

"This is Lester Leith."

"You a lawyer?"

"No," Leith said. "I'm a friend of Miss Lamen's. I'm hoping that it won't be necessary—"

Jason Bellview cut him short. "Well, if you're not a lawyer, what business is it of yours?"

Leith said, "I'm a financier."

"A what?"

"A financier, I finance various business activities. Right at the moment I'm financing Miss Lamen in her claim against you. I'm hoping it isn't going to be necessary to engage a lawyer."

"Get a lawyer and be damned!" Bellview shouted.

"Very well," Leith said. "Only I hope you'll bear in mind that I offered to make a reasonable settlement with you. Perhaps before you act foolishly you'd better consult your own attorney and find out what he has to say."

"I'm not foolish," Bellview said. "I simply refuse to pay blackmail."

"All right," Leith said. "Have it your own way. Only remember, when your company gets involved in a hundred-thousand-dollar lawsuit and your lawyer informs you that you haven't a leg to stand on, how painful it will be to recall that you had a chance to settle the case out of court. And if the stockholders of the Precision Instrument Designing and Installation Company learn of it—"

"Now just hold on a minute. I never turn down anything sight unseen. What's your figure?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"All right, it's turned down. I feel better now. No jury would award her a sum that large."

"That's what you think."

Bellview said, "That's what I know. Goodbye."

The sound made by the slamming receiver at the other end of the line was distinctly audible.

Bernice Lamen sighed. "I knew it," she said.

Lester Leith picked up the ten one-hundred-dollar bills, and slid

them over to her. "Remember you've got these coming, if it doesn't work."

"No, I can't take that money—but I was right. He'll never alter his decision. He's too stubburn a man. It was a gamble, and we lost."

Leith smiled. "I think we'd better have a little more spiced coffee. There's no reason for you to go back to the office now."

Tears came to her eyes. She blinked them back, laughed, and said, "Oh, well, it was fun while it lasted."

Leith said, "Don't worry about it. He reacted just about the way I thought he would?"

"You mean you expected him to turn you down?"

Leith nodded.

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because he'll think it over and call up his lawyer. After we've had another cup of coffee. I'll call him back. When I do I'm quite sure we'll hear a different story. He may be stubborn, but he's not a fool."

They chatted over the second cup of coffee and had a brandy and benedictine. Then Leith dialed Jason Belleview's number again and got the president of the instrument company on the line. This time Bellview's voice was cautious.

"Listen, Leith, perhaps you won't have to go to a lawyer. Miss Lamen is certainly entitled to some compensation, but ten thousand dollars, of course, is out of the question."

"She'll want an apology," Leith said, "an apology delivered in front of the entire office staff."

Bellview hesitated for a minute. "That might be arranged," he conceded.

"And," Leith went on, "she'll want ten thousand dollars in cash."

"Wait a minute," Bellview said, and Leith heard the sounds of a whispered conversation at the other end of the line.

"We'll offer twenty-five hundred," Bellview said.

"Nothing doing," Leith told him. "Ten or nothing. The minute I hang up, I'm leaving here to consult a lawyer. Personally, I think she's entitled to an even larger sum. You—"

"Wait a minute," Bellview said.

This time there was no attempt to keep the conversation at the other end of the line subdued.

"You send Bernice Lamen up to my office," Bellview said, when the conversation had come to an abrupt halt, followed by what had sounded like a grunt of profound displeasure.

Leith laughed and said, "No chance. You don't talk with her until you've agreed to pay ten thousand. Otherwise, you talk with a lawyer."

There was a momentary pause. Then Leith heard Bellview mutter, "He says it's ten or nothing.

That's too damn much. What do we do?"

Another voice made a suggestion and Bellview said into the telephone, "Mr. Leith, my lawyer's here with me. We've talked this thing over, and he agrees that you may have a lawsuit. Then again—you may not. We'll pay five thousand as a reasonable settlement."

Lester Leith smiled into the transmitter. "You've compromised a lawsuit," he said.

"All right, tell Miss Lamen to come up here right away."

Lester Leith dropped the receiver into place, reached across the table and picked up the one thousand dollars.

She looked up at him, her eyes large with incredulity, "You mean he actually agreed—"

Leith said, "With that face and figure, you should at least go to Hollywood."

X

CAPTAIN CARMICHAEL was enjoying a cigar and the sports page of the morning newspaper when Sergeant Ackley, carrying a cardboard folder, entered the office.

"What is it this time?" Carmichael asked, frowning as he looked up from the paper.

Sergeant Ackley sat down on the other side of the captain's desk. "This guy Leith," he said disgustedly.

"What about him?"

"Beaver said he'd written a letter to me, and he thought it might be a good idea for me to know what was in it before Leith signed and mailed it."

Captain Carmichael's eyes danced. "Something, at least, that could be interpreted as an admission of guilt?"

"You listen to it," Sergeant Ackley said. "Then perhaps you can tell me."

Ackley turned back the pasteboard folder, and read from a carbon copy of a letter:

My dear Sergeant: The original manuscripts of famous writers have at times commanded fabulous prices. It is perhaps, conceited to think that my own efforts will some day be worth thousands of dollars to the discriminating collector. Yet, after all, Edgar Allen Poe, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and other well-known authors must have felt the same way when they rather dolefully contemplated their manuscripts which had been returned from the printer.

This story, my dear Sergeant, has not only been returned from the printers. It has been returned from the publisher, which should make it even more valuable. In any event, I want you to have it as a token of my appreciation for the zealous efforts you have made to enforce the law, even when my own convenience has been sacrificed to your zeal.

Sergeant Ackley glanced up. "Now what," he asked, "do you make of that?"

"Nothing," Captain Carmichael said.

"That's the way I feel about it, but he told Beaver the letter wasn't to be mailed until tomorrow. So Beaver thought I might want to have a look at it today."

"What about the actual manuscript?" Carmichael asked. "Is it as good as he claims?"

"Hell, no. I could do better myself," Ackley said.

"Did you read it?"

"Oh, I glanced through it."

Captain Carmichael reached for the manuscript. "This is a carbon copy?"

"Uh huh."

"How come?"

"He isn't going to mail this letter until tomorrow, you see, and he has the original copy with him."

Captain Carmichael frowningly regarded the carbon copy. "Nothing to it?" he asked.

"Very little," Ackley said. "Although the writing isn't too bad."

"But," Carmichael said, "he must have had some reason for sending it to you."

"He had a reason, sure. But I'm too suspicious to figure it out!"

Captain Carmichael frowned at the end of his cigar. "I believe Leith may have intended to cash in on what he knows and then tip you off as to the identity of the original crook."

"Why should he do that?"

"Well, you know this crime is a little different from the other crimes we've worked on. This is getting pretty close to treason, and I don't think Leith would go to the length of shielding a traitor. He'd never sell the stolen blueprints for money either, but if there's some money involved in the crook payoff part of the deal he's sure to go after it, before or after the blueprints are recovered."

Sergeant Ackley fished a cigar from his pocket and nodded.

"Have you read through this?" Carmichael asked.

Sergeant Ackley nodded again.

Carmichael turned rapidly through the pages. Suddenly he said, "Wait a minute. What's this?"

"Where?" Ackley asked.

"On page five," Carmichael said. "Just listen to this: 'I looked across the street into the window of the Precision Instrument Company. It occurred to me that if the commotion of the previous day had had anything to do with the theft of the blueprints, the culprit might take advantage of a similar commotion to endeavor to return the blueprints to the safe. If you wished to conceal a valuable set of blueprints there aren't many hiding places which would be as suitable as a safe. They would be inside a long, hollow tube, and such a tube would be extremely hard to conceal.' "

"Well," Ackley snorted, "What's significant about that? Hell, it doesn't really mean anything."

Captain Carmichael's face showed his excitement. "Wait a minute!" he exclaimed. "He's just paving the way here for the next paragraph.

Again Carmichael quoted. " 'As soon as the actress I had employed started screaming for the police, I noticed a man pick up a shotgun. This man was in the offices of the Precision Instrument Company, standing in the doorway of an office which adjoined the larger room containing the vault. A shotgun. How interesting!' "

Captain Carmichael looked up. "Well," he asked, "don't you get it?"

"Get what?" Sergeant Ackley said.

"The shotgun!" Carmichael almost shouted the words.

"Nerts," Sergeant Ackley said. "We know all about that. That man was Frank Packerson, the editor of the house organ. He'd been trapshooting, and—"

"Are there some photographs that go with this?" Carmichael asked.

"The same ones you saw. They don't mean anything. They simply—"

"The shotgun!" Captain Carmichael persisted, cutting him short. "Don't you get it, you damn fool? The shotgun!"

"What about it?"

Captain Carmichael pushed back his chair. "Lester Leith wanted you to read this manuscript tomorrow. You're reading it just twenty-four hours ahead of time. Leith intended to show you how to get the man who stole those blueprints. By that time, he intended to have the blueprints and he would have covered his tracks and been in the clear. But because of some nice brain work on the part of Beaver, you got this letter and the manuscript today. And you haven't sense enough to know what it means."

Sergeant Ackley's face became a shade darker with anger. "Well," he demanded, "what the hell *does* it mean?"

Captain Carmichael got to his feet. "Get a squad car," he said, "and I'll show you."

XI

FRANK PACKERSON clicked on the intercom, and sat very straight in his chair as the reception clerk announced, "Two gentlemen from police headquarters."

Packerson smiled. "Show them in."

Captain Carmichael did the talking. "We're working on the missing blueprints, Packerson," he said. "The thief must have had some original and unusual hiding place prepared in advance. All he needed was a second or two to slip the blueprints out of the vault and

into that hiding place unobserved.

"In other words," Carmichael went on, "the theory we're working on now is that the thief had that hiding place so carefully prepared that while it was instantly available, no one would ever have thought that the blueprints could be concealed in so unlikely a place, for it was an object he could keep in his hands without arousing the slightest suspicion. A long, smooth, slender tube could be quickly shoved into the barrel of a rifle, which is also long and slender. After that the tube could be taken out of the building without arousing suspicion."

Packerson wasn't smiling now.

"A man could seem to be holding a shotgun as a weapon. Who would suspect that he was making use of it for a quite different purpose?"

Packerson's face was flushed. Little beads of perspiration glistened on his forehead. He cleared his throat and said, "I don't know what you're insinuating, Captain. In my case, it happens that I had a gun. Naturally, when I heard someone shouting for the police, I grabbed it and—"

"Shoved the blueprints down the barrel," Captain Carmichael said.

"No, no! I swear that I didn't. Absolutely not!"

Captain Carmichael was insistent. "Yes, you did, Packerson. You grabbed your gun and stood close to the vault, holding it in your hands. Everyone thought you were standing there protecting the property of the company. No one realized that you yourself—"

"I tell you, I didn't," Packerson interrupted.

Captain Carmichael stood up. "Let's take a look at your gun, Packerson."

Packerson pushed back his chair, and seized the gun which was against the wall behind his desk. "Not by a damn sight," he said. "This gun is my private property. You can't examine it unless you have a search warrant."

Sergeant Ackley moved quickly toward him. "The hell we can't."

Packerson jumped back and raised the gun as if he were about to swing it as a weapon. "Keep away from me," he shouted wildly.

He ceased talking abruptly as his eyes came to focus on the small black hole which was the business end of Captain Carmichael's service revolver.

"Put that gun down!" Carmichael said.

Packerson hesitated for a moment, then dropped the gun and slumped back into his chair, covering his face with his hands.

"You got the blueprints in there now?" Captain Carmichael asked.

Packerson shook his head. "The money for them," he said.

Carmichael exchanged a significant glance with Sergeant Ack-

ley. "Who gave you the money, Packerson?"

"Gilbert, the furrier."

"He planned the whole thing?" Carmichael asked. "If you talk now it will be much easier for you later."

"Yes, Gilbert did. You see, we got to know each other well and became close friends. Lunched regularly and met together evenings. His girl friend, Fanny Gillmeyer, usually joined us. A couple of months ago, after too many drinks, I couldn't resist telling him about Hodges and his invention. Gilbert became immediately interested, excited." Packerson looked toward the floor as though reluctantly marshalling his thoughts.

"Go on, what happened," Carmichael prodded.

"Well, since business hadn't been too good with him recently, Frank Gilbert suggested we steal —my job obviously—the blueprints and then blackmail the company for their recovery. He felt they'd pay a couple of hundred thousand dollars since there was a Navy deadline to be met, and they needed the contract badly. I got cold feet. But when Gilbert said he'd take all the risks and even give me twenty thousand, I couldn't resist. Now," he bit his lower lip, "I realize it was a stupid and dangerously crude plan."

Carmichael asked, "How did you actually pull the substitution?"

"There really wasn't any customer," Parkerson said. "Fanny kept watching the offices over here. When she saw the coast was clear and that I could dash into the vault, snatch the blueprints, and get out before anyone noticed what I was doing, she tossed the cape out of the window and started yelling for the police. I was in and out of the vault, and standing with the gun at my shoulder even before the traffic officer on the corner left his post."

"Where are the blueprints now?"

"I gave them to Gilbert. I walked out last night carrying my trap gun, and right past the guard."

Captain Carmichael frowned. "Then you brought the gun back again today?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Don't you see?" Packerson said. "I got twenty thousand dollars for those blueprints. The money's in fifty-dollar bills. I didn't dare leave that money in my home, and I didn't dare keep it in my possession. So I rolled the bills into packages that would just fit into the gun barrel. In that way, I could keep the money with me all the time. In case anyone began to suspect me, I was all ready for a getaway."

Carmichael gave a low whistle. "So there's twenty thousand dollars in that gun?"

Packerson nodded.

Carmichael walked around the desk, stooped down, picked up the gun, and broke the barrel open.

It was Sergeant Ackley who blurted out, "There's no money in here now."

Packerson jumped to his feet. "No money in there!" He grabbed at the gun, stared at it with startled eyes, and said, "But that's not my gun!"

Captain Carmichael nudged Sergeant Ackley in the ribs.

"It's not my gun," Packerson repeated. "It's the same make, and the same model, but my gun had a scratch and—" His voice trailed away into silence.

Sergeant Ackley turned to the captain with a puzzled frown. "I just don't get it," he said. "Don't get it at all!"

Captain Carmichael pulled handcuffs from his hip pocket. "You will," he said. "We can still get those blueprints if we get after Gilbert and his girl friend. As far as the money is concerned—well, we can still get that too if we work fast enough, thanks to the fact that you got your manuscript twenty-four hours in advance. Now do you understand?"

Sergeant Ackley was staring at Captain Carmichael with eyes that seemed unable to focus. "You mean—Lester Leith was here and changed guns?"

"Exactly," Captain Carmichael said.

XII

BERNICE LAMEN lingered over her last drink with Lester Leith. Her eyes, as she raised them to regard his profile, were warm with appreciation. "I don't know," she said, "how I can ever thank you."

One of the waiters, who had been standing near the window, approached the table and whispered to Lester Leith. "Excuse me," he said, "But is your car number GXL—Five fifty-two?"

Leith's eyes narrowed. "Yes, that's my license number."

"I think you may have violated a parking ordinance, sir. I've noticed a couple of cops looking your car over, and now they're sitting in a squad car just outside of the door, apparently waiting for you to come out."

Lester Leith took out his wallet, removed a ten-dollar bill and pressed it into the waiter's hand. "Thanks very much," he said. "I tore up a couple of traffic tickets. I guess they've caught up with me. By the way, could you get me about a hundred of these paper napkins?"

The waiter stared at the bill. "Paper napkins? Of course. Yes, I should say so."

Lester Leith turned to Bernice Lamen. "On second thought," he said, "I think it would be better for you to have your talk with Jason Bellview alone. My presence would only give him a rush of

blood to the head, in view of what I said to him on the phone. I'm going to leave the restaurant in a few minutes, and you'd better wait ten or fifteen minutes before you go out. Then you can take a cab directly to Bellview's office."

The waiter brought a large stack of small paper cocktail napkins.

"My gun," Lester Leith said, "needs cleaning. I wonder if I could step out in the kitchen and run some napkins through it?"

"Why, certainly, but you don't need to use napkins. I can get you a rag and—"

"No," Leith said. "Napkins really work better." He got to his feet, and pressed Bernice Lamen's hand. "I don't have to wish you luck with Bellview," he said. "There's not a chance in the world now he'll go back on his word."

Puzzled, she saw him follow the waiter in the direction of the kitchen, nor was she greatly surprised when Leith failed to return. She waited a full fifteen minutes, then pushed back her chair. "The check," she asked, "did he—"

The waiter grinned. "I'll say he did."

Bernice Lamen started for the door.

"Wait a minute," the waiter said. "He forgot one of his guns."

"Oh, that's right—he did. Just when did he leave?"

"About five minutes ago," the waiter said. "He went out through the kitchen door into the alley. He'll probably work the old gag on the cops about his car having been stolen."

Bernice Lamen smiled brightly. "Under those circumstances, you'd better keep this gun here. I'm sure he'll be back for it."

The waiter took the leather gun case, and escorted Bernice Lamen to the door. "It's nice," he said, "having customers like you and the gentleman who was with you. I hope you come back."

Bernice Lamen smiled. "I hope we do, too," she said.

SERGEANT ACKLEY sitting in the squad car, suddenly clasped Captain Carmichael's arm. "There goes Lester Leith down that side street. And he's got the gun with him!"

Captain Carmichael said, "Take it easy, Sergeant. Don't let's tip our hand until we know we're right."

Lester Leith, with a gun case swung over his shoulder, and a brief case in his right hand, walked up to his car, and slid in behind the wheel.

Captain Carmichael said, "Okay, Sergeant, do your stuff. But don't make the arrest unless you're certain you've caught him red-handed."

Sergeant Ackley nodded, descended from the squad car, and started toward Leith's automobile.

Lester Leith was just about to start the car when Sergeant Ackley tapped him on the shoulder.

Leith glanced up, a smiling look in his eyes. "Well, if it isn't my dear old friend, the Sergeant!"

Sergeant Ackley's grin was wide. "Just checking up on stolen shotguns, Leith," he said. "That gun in the case is yours, isn't it?"

Leith hesitated perceptibly for an instant. Then he nodded, his lips set in tight lines.

"I'll just take a look at it," Sergeant Ackley said. He pulled the gun case out through the window, unfastened the catch, pulled out the rifle, and held it up to the light. The left-hand barrel shone with a clear, smooth polish. The right-hand barrel was choked up with rolled papers.

Sergeant Ackley's grin was triumphant. He tossed the gun into the back of the car. "Come on, Leith," he said. "You're going to headquarters."

Leith said, "I'm afraid you're making a mistake."

"I don't think so," Sergeant Ackley gloated. "It's been a long lane, Leith, but this is where the turn comes. Drive to headquarters, or I'll have to handcuff you and take you in that way."

Without a word, Leith started the car. Sergeant Ackley went back to the squad car, and told Captain Carmichael that the big break had finally come. The two cars kept less than eighty feet apart until they both drew in to the curb in front of a ten-story building with a massive, gray-stone facade.

In front of the desk sergeant, Ackley could not resist an impulse to boast. "All right, boys," he said, "I'll show you a little shrewd deduction. If you'll just give me something I can push down the barrel of this shotgun."

Ackley smiled at Captain Carmichael, who looked at him impatiently. "Notice," Ackley said as one of the officers handed him a wooden dowel, "that when I push this dowel through the left barrel of the shotgun, nothing happens. But when I push it through the right barrel, you'll see twenty thousand dollars in fifty-dollar bills come showering out on the floor."

Ackley pushed hard against the improvised ramrod.

There was a period of surprised silence. Then a gale of laughter ran around the room as a shower of paper cocktail napkins burst from the barrel of the shotgun and fluttered over the floor.

"Something I've never tried before," Leith said. "A hunter whose experience I respect told me it would keep a rifle barrel from rusting. I decided to use paper in the right barrel and nothing in the left, put the gun away for six months, and see which barrel was in better condition. I'm sorry, Sergeant, but you've ruined my experiment. Now, since you certainly owe me an apology at least, would you mind telling me why I was brought here?"

Captain Carmichael took Sergeant Ackley's arm. "Come on," he said. "We've got no time to lose!"

Lester Leith said, to the desk sergeant, "I really didn't steal those cocktail napkins. They were given to me."

Captain Carmichael rushed Sergeant Ackley out to their unmarked police car, "We can still get to the Gilbert Fur Company and recover those blueprints," he said.

"But," Ackley protested. "I don't understand. He couldn't have—"

"Damn it, he did!" Captain Carmichael said irritably. "I told you, Sergeant, that the big danger about using the Chinese method of fishing was that you had to keep a rope tied tightly around the bird's neck. Otherwise, he'd swallow the fish."

Sergean Ackley said, "What the hell was the name of that bird—something like a pelican, you said?"

Captain Carmichael pushed him into the car. "Never mind about that. It's a cinch, now, to pick up Gilbert and Gillmeyer and, incidentally, those missing blueprints, and you know how the chief will feel about that. It will help take the curse off our blundering. I don't know but what Leith was really entitled to his twenty thousand dollars in this case.

"Now, let's pick up a couple of damned fool amateurs."

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THE DEATH OF A BUM

By DONALD E. WESTLAKE

In life the slain man's criminal record had been so unsavory that his murder angered no one very much. But to police officer Levine an indifference to Justice was a crime in itself.

Bail Hearing

by ARNOLD ENGLISH

The judge had a difficult decision to make. Was harshness or leniency best for a tragically mixed up kid?

THE JUDGE TOOK off his court robe and sat down back of the desk. "I'll decide whether or not to allow bail," he said. "I want to

hear your side of it in private, young man."

"Yes, judge." Tony Greer's dark, troubled eyes were narrowed. "As long as I don't have to double-cross nobody, whatever you say goes."

"You pulled a hold-up, Tony. Tell me about that."

"Well, I was told to do it." Tony gave an expressive little shrug. "I never expected I'd get reamed."

"That's pretty surprising. I've sat in Juvenile Court for five years now, and I've seldom had to pass sentence on a juvenile offender who took it for granted he'd never get caught."

"I'll tell you why, in my case." Pride inflated Tony's body, making him look older than his sixteen years. "Nobody in my gang ever did a day's term in prison."

" 'Gang'." The judge nodded and glanced down at the papers on his desk. "The Imperial Kings."

"I've wanted to join up for as long as I could remember." Tony smiled. "In my neighborhood, you can't run alone, so you might as well run with the gang that makes you feel safest, and that's the Imperial Kings."

The judge felt a little guilty himself, as he generally did when he saw some of the underprivileged coming before him in court. Probably he was too sensitive. He forced himself to look stern.

"And I suppose you didn't like any of it."

"I liked everything I did with the Imperial Kings," Tony Greer said. "The girls were great, and the joy-popping was fun, and any guy who followed orders was supposed to be safe from jail."

"You haven't become a narcotics addict, I hope."

"On my word I haven't, Judge."

More reliable than the boy's word was his neatness, his self-control. The judge pursed his lips.

"About the robbery," he began.

"Well, in order to get initiated I was told I'd have to do two things. The first one was to walk up to a policeman and steal a bullet from out of his belt." Tony Greer winced at the memory. "I was scared, but there wasn't no trouble."

"Was it sensible?" the judge felt he had to ask.

"For a guy who wants to be on the safe side and join the Imperial Kings, Judge, it was sensible."

The judge could have made a couple of clever remarks, but he didn't. "What was the second thing you had to do in order to become a member of the gang?"

"*That* was it, Judge—robbing Mr. Brodsky's fish store without wearing a mask. Well, I walked right in and did it. That's about all, Judge, except that I was identified and I'm here. But not for long. Any guy with the Imperial Kings, let alone a prospective

member, don't serve a jail term."

"And you won't name one member of this gang, even if it means reducing the inevitable sentence," the judge said, recalling what was on the probation officer's report. "As you haven't been initiated into this gang, you wouldn't be betraying an oath. Tony Greer shook his head firmly.

The judge said, "Co-operate with the Youth Squad and name the boys who belong to this gang, and you might even be freed on probation. Otherwise, you'll be put into a reformatory until you reach the age of twenty-one."

"Nobody who works with the Imperial Kings ever serves a sentence. I won't do a day's stretch in any reformatory."

"Not even if it means your getting a small bail, so that you can spend a few days in freedom before your trial comes up?" The judge waited for a reply. When it wasn't forthcoming he sighed resignedly and said: "Tony, your parents have been very straight-

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forward and convincing in their talks with me. As a result I've decided, against my better judgment and entirely for their sakes, to set the bail at a low figure."

"I haven't been under arrest for a day, even," Tony said, grinning. "See what I mean, Judge? I won't do no stretch."

"I'm sure I'll hate myself for it as soon as I've signed the papers," the judge said, making his voice stern to show that he wanted to be thought of as a harsh arbiter of justice, after all. "Wait outside with the bailiff."

When the court clerk arrived a few minutes later, the judge said, "I'm sending Greer back to spend a few more days with his young hoodlum friends, but you can't set an unreasonably high bail in a first-offense juvenile case. It would be harsh—unjust. He added with a profanity that was rare for him when he was away from the golf course, "What in hell else could I have done?"

"I MANAGED TO get away for an hour," Tony Greer said eagerly to Peter Santos, gang leader of the Imperial Kings. "Can't we make the intiation fast? You guys'll never know how much I want it."

"Sure, Tony, sure," Santos said. "We'll make a circle right now and get it over with . . . Get in a circle, you guys."

Fourteen boys hurriedly formed a circle, with Tony and Santos in its center.

"We all know that Tony has been loyal, and that he might have to do a reformatory stretch on account of it."

Tony put in, "I know you guys will keep me from taking a fall."

"We've never had anybody connected with us put in a day at any reformatory," Pete Santos said. "That's because we know that the cops would have years to work on any guy, and they might get names out of him sooner or later and then put heat on the rest of us. The reason we've all been around so long is that the cops don't have any opportunity to find out who we are."

"I'd never give a single name," Tony started.

"The Imperial Kings can't afford to take chances, even on our newest member," Santos said, then added, "Sorry, kid."

Tony Greer's chest had automatically begun swelling with pride, but that was before the knife found his heart.

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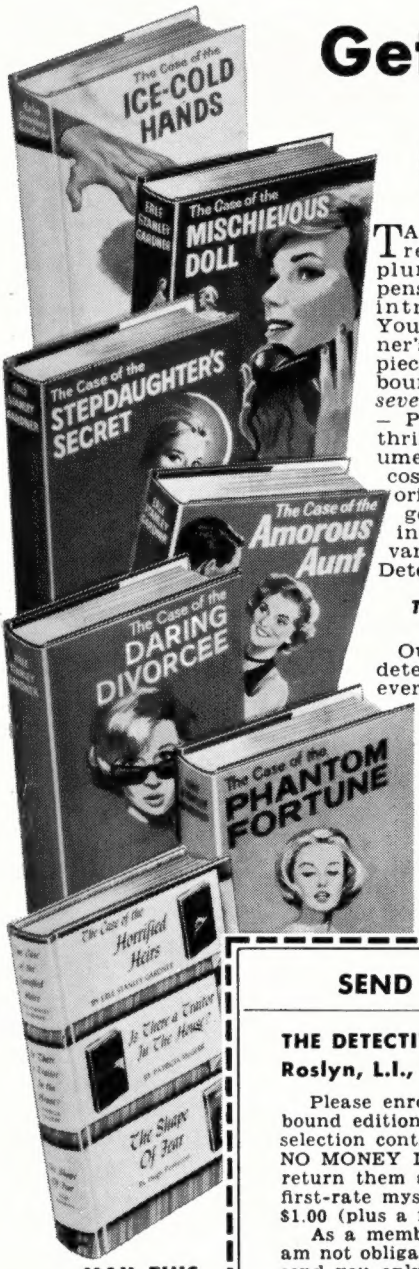
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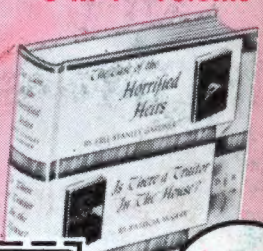

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